

interzone

SEPTEMBER 2002

NUMBER 182

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Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff

Mat Coward

Christopher Evans

Claude Lalumière

Zoran Živković

**plus an
interview
with
Ted
Chiang**

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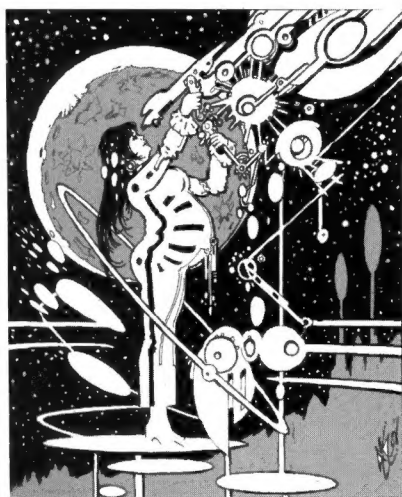
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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

SEPTEMBER 2002

Number 182

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Golden Age

Dear Editors:

At 80 I must be one of your older readers. I've been a fan of science fiction and fantasy since I read H. G. Wells's stories in the 1920s. In the '30s I read Olaf Stapledon and many more. I was much taken with James Branch Cabell (*Jurgen* and other stories). He had style and wit. Forgotten nowadays, I suppose. I used to devour John Campbell's editorials in *Astounding*, partly because I was often much at odds with his views. That was, I suppose, the Golden Age. But our own day has many fine writers – James Ballard, Tanith Lee, Robert Silverberg (declined, though, from the past heights of *Dying Inside*), the two Greys, etc, etc. This too is no less a Golden Age. Long may it continue, and long may *Interzone* flourish.

Hugh T. Paterson

Darvel, Ayrshire



Futureland

Dear Editors:

Has Walter Mosley's *Futureland* been published in the UK yet? I'll endorse Jetse de Vries's recommendation ("Interaction," *IZ* 179) that it is a fine book and deserves a review. A straight connection, if you like, between *noir* detective fiction and its modern grandchild cyberpunk... And one of the few black writers to take up the issue of race in an sf novel – certainly in what you might call an aggressive, Wellsian way.

Mike Moorcock

Texas

Editor: Thanks for your comments on Mosley's novel. You ask if it has been published in the UK yet. Apparently not. I've checked Amazon.com UK and they seem to be selling the US edition. Mosley's previous sf book, *Blue Light*, was published in the UK by *Serpent's Tail*, so I've checked their website too, but no mention there of *Futureland*. Anyway, it's a book I'll be looking out for...

Wot, No Women?

Dear Editors:

A quick response to Barbara Davies's letter ("Interaction," *IZ* 179) about the *infinity plus* issue of *Interzone* (no. 177):

True, there were no female contributors in our guest-edited issue but that was by chance and not design. It was something I realized as we were finalizing the line-up but at that stage I chose to stick to our selection process and not resort to positive discrimination – we

had no hidden agenda and I'd certainly hope that we didn't have any built-in prejudices affecting our choices. Quite simply: we had a single issue to edit so where we considered contributions we did so on their merits and where we invited specific contributors they were selected on the basis of their involvement in *infinity plus*. Indeed, only a tiny minority of story submissions received came from female writers. It may be argued, then, that any bias relates to an imbalance in the mix of our contributors at *infinity plus* itself and I'd agree with that, to an extent: I've often commented that female writers seem more hesitant about showcasing their work on our website – that's not through lack of invitations on our part! In fact, I seem to remember that Barbara, herself, turned down an invitation to contribute reviews because she was already committed in other publications...

Keith Brooke

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Scathingly Satirical

Dear Editors:

Uhhhmazing! A mammoth four-page rant from Evelyn Lewes (*IZ* 179) and not one single mention of *Babylon 5*. Maybe because no one in it has a schnozzle worthy of mention. The only piece of TV sf (and I use the term loosely) that came out unscathed this time was *Third Rock From the Sun*, a mediocre sitcom that cosies up to pap such as *My Favourite Martian* and *I Dream of Jeannie*; an orphan genre

that amounts to nothing more than the pocket fluff of sf. I saw *Jack and the Beanstalk: The True Story* in the company of my son. He wandered back to his computer half way through while I persevered, attracted by the cast list, and found the production to be bland fare, despite the heavy names. I have a lasting impression that they took the money and sleepwalked. Big names do not necessarily a decent production make! I have long harboured serious doubts about the grizzled nags in the Roddenberry stable. Not for the risible performances and plots, which can be entertaining if you approach it from a Golden Turkey perspective, but for the fact that the characters are so annoyingly smug and incessantly nice to each other even when they are trying not to be. While it's cheering to see Evelyn Lewes have a crack at the precious Roddenberry franchises I find myself asking, yet again, why she bothers reviewing TV sf when she demonstrably doesn't like the subject material she's researching. She makes her writing seem like a chore and treats many shows as a personal affront to her sensibilities.

Admittedly, a lot of TV sf is questionable. The tongue-firmly-in-cheek *Farscape* would never win a prize for scientific feasibility but since when should time travel (à la *Doctor Who*) not be entitled to come under the aegis of sf? I get the sneaking suspicion that *B5*, *Farscape*, *Stargate* and their ilk would fare better in Evelyn's estimation should a top-rank thespian such as Dame Judi Dench or Joss Ackland decide to go slumming (don't forget the Alec Guinness precedent). However, Dame Judi fiddling with a naquada reactor about to go critical doesn't quite cut the mustard for me. (Yes, I admit I watch this stuff. It's harmless, amusing and I enjoy it!)

TV sf productions are hardly top-brow viewing and I don't mind a critic waxing scathingly satirical about shows I personally enjoy but please, Evelyn, stop being a snob and give your readership some creditable reviews.

Lynne Lancaster

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Who's Genre

Dear Editors:

Evelyn Lewes is correct to question *Doctor Who*'s sf credentials (*IZ* 179); however I suspect her identification of it as horror derives mainly from its 1975-1977 output which abounded with references to classic Universal horror films and 1950s B-Movies.

A better case could be made for *Doctor Who* being merely historical adventure facilitated by minimal use of time

travel. A large portion of the show's 1963-1966 output is essentially BBC period drama, not science fiction.

Having said this the vast bulk of the Doctor's television stories must be categorised as sf. Space opera and alien invasion predominate. Whilst the show parasitizes other genres, for example 1971's "The Daemons" owes everything to Dennis Wheatley, it always tried to back up its digressions with science-fictional explanations – in this case all the magic is stated to be advanced (but poorly explained) technology.

A notable trend in the books range reportedly enlarges on some of the last TV stories, "Silver Nemesis" and "Battlefield," where use of magic is casually parcelled in with sf elements without comment, which to me suggests the least rigorous bounds of fantasy. But I'll leave it to more dedicated readers of the book series to debate that.

Allan Toombs

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Calder in Space

Dear Editors:

I have only one thing to say about Richard Calder's story "Zarzuela" (IZ 178) and that is "Units!" It's bad enough having altitudes reported in miles but when we get to "the force needed to open a wormhole," well, what can you say? Forces are measured in Newtons nowadays and when it's a force exerted over an area (square metres, thanks) it becomes a pressure which has its own unit, the Pascal. Off the back of an envelope I think 10 to the power of 33 pounds per square inch is about 40 to the power 36 Pascals (very approximately). Sounds a lot.

Actually, I enjoyed that story. I wasn't a "Lord Soho" fan and I look forward to more space opera (as opposed to, what? Fantasy?) from Richard Calder.

Can I also say that I thought Tony Ballantyne's "Teaching the War Robot to Dance" (IZ 178) was a lovely story.

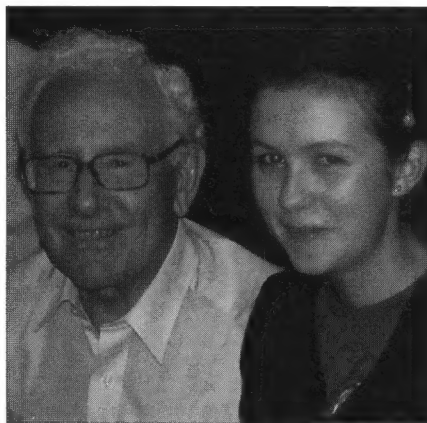
Nick Dale

Lancaster

Fantasticalness

Dear Editors:

I must refute the suggestion, made by Ken Olende in your letters column (IZ 180), that I asked *Interzone* to concentrate on the "overtly fantastical." In my original letter – which appeared in #178 – I simply criticized the appearance of two stories. One, Paul Park's "Self-Portrait, with Melanoma," was a piece of experimental writing. While I appreciate that *BBR* is gone and that the market for these may have vanished, it was not a genre fit for *IZ*. As I



Short-notice visitor to the *Interzone* Friday meeting over the August Bank Holiday was Sam Youd/John Christopher, seen here with Amaryllis, one of his younger admirers.

said in my previous correspondence the other, Gwyneth Jones's "The Salt Box," may have been a prelude to a fantasy novel, but had we not been informed of that in the postscript – or indeed chosen not to read the postscript – then we would have wondered what it was doing there also.

I would like it on the record that I have no wish for *Interzone* to concentrate on the "overtly fantastical" – to me that conjures images of swords-and-sorcery crap that I could really do without. I simply ask that the magazine publishes material that falls *recognizably* under the very broad banner of "Science Fiction and Fantasy," the sub-heading that hangs over the contents page.

Lee Tchami

Craigdon, Scotland

Ashok Banker's Story

Dear Editors:

Please convey my delight and congratulations to author Ashok Banker for his story "In the Shadow of Her Wings," published in your April 2001 issue and reprinted in the anthology *Year's Best Fantasy 2* (edited by David Hartwell). It is powerful, deep, and compelling. I am particularly glad that at last a Kali story has been published that has a modern as well as a religious-philosophical sensibility and is a far cry from the hundreds of third-rate "Thugee cult" stories unleashed upon the world by hack British colonial writers and their descendants.

The sun of Indian sf will shine the brighter for Ashok Banker's bold work. Thank you!

Vandana Singh

lekha@mindspring.com

Editor: In an e-mail from India, Ashok Banker filled us in on what he has been up to since writing his two stories for *Interzone*: "Am waiting for proofs of the UK (Orbit) edition of my first fantasy

novel, Prince of Ayodhya, due out in Feb 2003. The series, 'The Ramayana,' will be published next year onwards in the UK, Commonwealth, USA, Germany, Japan, Italy and France. Besides that fantasy series, three books of which are already written, am also working on an sf series, 'The Ganesa Palindrome.' And the Pocket Essential Stephen King I'm just finishing up..." Phew! Busy man.

John Clute's Style

Dear Editors:

After "Ansible Link," the book reviews are the first part of your magazine that I read, preferring to wait until I have more time before savouring the fiction.

Accordingly, I have just finished reading John Clute's reviews in *Interzone* 181. May I just ask what "Twins are termites of the scaffolding of the self in daylight, they are phagocytes of the world day" actually means?

I'd like to think that I have a reasonable level of intelligence, however the reason for the inclusion of the above phrases in the review of Greg Bear's *Vitals* mystifies me. As does, on reflection, about 70% of the rest of his reviews.

Would it not be more helpful for a prospective consumer to have an articulate and informed review of their potential purchase, rather than a verbose collection of almost incomprehensible epithets? I have no doubt that should Mr Clute receive a book for review written in his own authorial style, he would have no difficulty in formulating a choice and uncomplimentary critique.

Yours, with compliments on an otherwise fine publication,

Dan O'Brien

drjobrien@hotmail.com

Editor: Longtime readers of this magazine will know that John Clute is a law unto himself.

Issue Frequency

Dear Editors:

It was with great distress that I saw your cover (issue 180) labelled "June-July," and with great relief that I read the message inside saying this was a one-time event and not a move to that 11-issues-a-year schedule so popular this side of the Pond.

Evelyn C. Leeper

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Letters for publication should be e-mailed to interzone@cix.co.uk – or sent by conventional post to our editorial address (shown on the contents page). Please note that we reserve the right to shorten letters.

Posterity

Christopher Evans

The latest batch of time travellers arrived on a Friday morning. Rupert rang at six am with the news. He asked if we had any spare rooms (I'm sure he already knew), then told me to expect "some new Visitors." He always called them that, stressing the word so that it sounded capitalized. Half an hour later a black Ford Galaxy from the ministry reversed into the cul-de-sac at the rear of the building and disgorged them before disappearing into the still-dark morning.

They were four of them, two men and two women, young and healthy-looking, all dressed against the cold in ministry-issue hats, gloves and sober nondescript overcoats.

"Have a pleasant journey?" I couldn't resist asking as they signed their names in the register I was obliged to keep. One of the men looked up, smiled indulgently and gave a slow nod. The biro moved awkwardly in his hand as he wrote down a name. Maybe they didn't use pens any more; or maybe I was just imagining it.

He looked vaguely Asiatic, while one of the women plainly had African blood. The other two were Caucasian, though this tells me nothing about their nationality, if such a thing still has meaning in their time.

As usual they paid in advance for a three-day stay. I watched one of the women put a slim bundle of crisp £20 notes on the desk.

"Long trip?" I asked her. It was the only question I was officially allowed.

"One twenty-five," she told me.

"All come together, did you?"

Another measured nod. Her placid expression betrayed nothing of her thoughts and feelings. The others had fixed polite smiles that made me think they were first-timers, eager not to cause offence in our era, scrupulously trying not to show an interest in every detail of their new surroundings.

I slid the notes into the desk drawer without bothering to count them. The going rate was £100 per night per per-

son. They always paid in advance and without a qualm.

"We would like individual rooms adjoining one another," the woman said. "If you would be as kind."

I kept a straight face. They never got the vernacular quite right, and this lot had lilting accents that sounded like a cross between West Country and Australian, with a tendency to raise their inflexions towards the end of each sentence so that every statement had the air of a question.

"Of course," I said. "Happy to agglomerate you."

Not a flicker of a reaction to this. Maybe previous travellers had already warned them of my tendency to throw in the odd discombobulating word or phrase at unexpected moments. Of course it was trivial and childish, as well as being bad mannered; but then, who's perfect?

"Will you be wanting breakfast?" I asked.

"No," the woman said. "That's not necessary."

She took her hat off and shook out her hair. Blonde. Very attractive. The others kept their headwear on. They're the standard age: mid-30s or so with seamless faces and shiny white teeth. I've never yet had a traveller who showed any obvious signs of ageing; or anyone young, for that matter. Sometimes they're friendly, sometimes reserved, though none of them will ever specify why they've come. Ministry rules. I'm not even supposed to ask.

All four carried dark slim-line briefcases: presumably they contained a change of underwear, a few toiletries and perhaps even a phrasebook and a map of the city. As always with the travellers such matters were conjectural.

The blonde woman put something that looked like a translucent golf ball on the counter. It flowered open for an instant, releasing odours of cinnamon and citrus.

I didn't pick it up. I wasn't allowed to. The travellers always brought little trinkets like this to prove they were the genuine article – crystals that danced with pastel lights, motile sponges that polished table tops, coin-sized discs that whirled like little gyroscopes and played Mozart. Nothing too spectacular or unnerving. Gewgaws

for the primitives to marvel at.

The woman retrieved the ball and slipped it into one of the pockets of her overcoat.

"Very nice," I said. "Have you got anything for keeping flies off pastries?"

I gave the new arrivals the rooms on the first floor overlooking Tottenham Court Road. The hostel has eight in all, though we've never had more than four occupied at any one time. Very orderly, our travellers, booking their slots so that they don't clash with one another. Easy when you have prior knowledge.

When I got back downstairs I checked the names in the register. They had each signed it: *James Nelson, Catherine Shaw, Thomas Reynolds, Alice Parker*. I once asked Rupert if the ministry made a point of assigning the most boring Anglo-Saxon names to the travellers that they could find. He wasn't amused and muttered something about old graveyards.

I switched on the TV in the back room and sat and watched it without absorbing anything until I heard Suzanne come downstairs. She was talking to my son, Leo. The two of them went straight out the front door. Soon afterwards I heard the van drive off.

I turned the sound right down on the TV. There was no noise from upstairs. Most of the travellers were as polite and unobtrusive as they could be. What did they do up there immediately after their arrival? Take a nap? Check their itineraries? Use some kind of temporal mobile phone to call home and say they've arrived safely? I hated the futility of such speculations but they were impossible to avoid.

I was still slumped in front of the TV when Suzanne walked in a little later, hauling a box of frozen pork sausages that she'd picked up from the Cash'n'Carry.

"Give us a hand," she said, setting it down beside the desk. "The van's full and I'm on my own."

"I thought Leo was with you," I said, following her outside into the alleyway. There was no sign of the boy.

"He helped me load up, then did one of his disappearing acts. Amazing how fast he can move when he wants to."

She sounded more amused than peeved.

"Where's he gone?"

"How would I know? I looked around and he was gone."

"I'll skin him alive!"

"No you won't, Nick," she said, hefting an industrial-sized container of vegetable oil. "You'll give him a lecture and he'll nod and carry on as before."

"He does nothing around here."

"What do you expect? He can't see past the end of his hormones."

"It's not funny, Suzanne."

"Well, it's hardly a hanging offence, either."

I didn't pursue it, not wanting to get into an argument about the boy. Leo was my son, not hers. Suzanne had always been more relaxed about his comings and goings.

We unloaded the van in convoy, stacking everything non-perishable in the storeroom; the rest went into the freezers. I found the physical exertion welcome, the frosty

morning air helping to banish my sluggishness. Dawn was a reluctant grey light seeping through thick cloud.

Only when it was all done and Suzanne was sitting down in the living room with a cup of coffee and the morning newspaper did I say, "We've got a new set of travellers."

She turned a page of *The Sun*. "I heard."

I thought she'd slept through Rupert's call but evidently not. Rupert was her elder brother, though they weren't particularly close.

"Four," I said.

"Goody," she said without enthusiasm. "More money for you."

"For us."

"Whatever."

She was stretched out on the sofa in blue jeans and a fisherman's sweater rolled up to the elbows. Her hair was tucked back in a loose ponytail that revealed the graceful curve of her neck. I used to creep up behind her and plant kisses on it until her wriggling finally turned into a passionate surrender.

"We're hardly overcharging," I said. "If you consider inflation, it's probably peanuts to them."

No response to this.

"Besides, it was the ministry that set the rates."

"I know, Nick."

We'd had this conversation before. We'd had *all* the conversations about the travellers before. I didn't really care about the money as long as we had enough to live on.

"Four's the most we've lodged in weeks."

"Maybe there's a convention."

"Ha, ha."

She turned a page of the newspaper and started reading an article entitled *TIME TRAVELLERS FATHERED MY TWINS*. The photograph showed a young mother with unexceptional-looking babies, one boy and one girl. The woman was apparently claiming to have been seduced into a bizarre *ménage à trois* that had resulted in her being successively impregnated by both male partners.

"Why do you read that rubbish?" I asked.

"Why do you watch so much crap TV?"

An hour later, Boris showed up. I was stacking frozen sausages next to the deep-fat fryer when the bell chimed. He was standing on the doorstep with his briefcase.

"Nicholas!" he said cheerily. "I am back!"

"Well, well," I said. "Look what the quantum cat's dragged in."

"How are you, my good fellow?" he asked.

"Sick as Paraquat," I replied.

A boisterous laugh at this. Very expansive with his emotions, was Boris. His hair was longer than when he'd last visited, and he looked a little dishevelled, in need of a bath and shave.

I was less than thrilled to see him. Boris was our time-traveller dilettante, and in my more morose moments I blamed him for everything. He first appeared soon after the hostel opened, a good-looking but louche character of Suzanne's age who took a room for two nights, signing his name as *A. Guest*. He spent his first evening getting

so drunk in one of the local pubs that he didn't leave his room the next day.

It was only a month or so since his last visit, and the third time he'd come to the hostel. His English accent was rather preposterous, like a stage Russian's, but Suzanne and I had named him Boris for the spider he'd had tattooed on his upper arm in some disreputable Soho establishment on his first drunken night in our time. As a child Suzanne had had a pet tarantula of that name. Boris was delighted with the sobriquet and never volunteered his own. I think he saw it as a badge of acceptance.

"What are you doing here again?" I asked him. "I thought we'd seen the last of you."

"You think I would not come again to see your superlative wife? To sample more of the primitive delights of your time? The racing of horses, the riding of omnibuses, the delicious primal scent of your women?"

I didn't rise to this. On the surface Boris was far more open and uninhibited than any of the other time travellers. He came from 90 years up the timeline and claimed that he was a simple tourist who merely wanted to be "sociable with the past" on the most trivial low-life level, seeking out sensual pleasure rather than factual knowledge. But he was rather too demonstrative in his enthusiasms and appetites to be totally convincing. I suspected that he had a deeper purpose that would doubtless remain hidden from us behind a smokescreen of bluff camaraderie.

"Suzanne's not here," I told him. She was out delivering breakfast rolls to a friend of hers who ran a hair-dressing salon on Beak Street.

"Ah. In any case I must go out myself today. Is my usual room available?"

Somewhat to my annoyance, I had to admit that it was.

"Splendid! Then perhaps you would take my luggage and keep it safe until later?"

He thrust the briefcase into my hands.

"Important day, is it?" I asked.

He gave a little tinkling laugh. "Oh no, my friend, nothing like that. I wish to make the most of the air and then later perhaps take a sauna. The weather forecast is good for today, yes?"

"Whose? Yours or ours?"

He slapped me on the arm. "You are so witty, Nicholas. It is a gift."

I wanted to slap him back, only right across the face. But already he was heading off down the street in his infuriatingly jaunty way.

I carried the case upstairs to the room he had occupied on his last visit. Unlike most of the other travellers, Boris seemed to have few notions of personal privacy or the sanctity of private property. He was a maverick, and after his second visit I'd asked Rupert whether he was actually on the ministry's list. Rupert had assured me he was indeed an official Visitor.

I flung the briefcase on the bed. It was constructed of tough lightweight stuff, presumably some kind of advanced plastic; but it had no locks or latches, no telltale depressions or indentations. On a previous visit Boris had left it on his dresser while he was out. I'd been tempted to haul it down to my workroom and take the circular saw

to it, but that would have been an irrevocable act. I wasn't going to risk losing my licence in a probably futile attempt to satisfy my curiosity.

I went to the window and spotted him loitering at the window of a bookshop that specialized in under-the-counter sales of "adult" comics. Then he took himself off down a side street and was lost from sight. His carefree air merely inflamed my hatred. Quite unexpectedly I realized that I had decided to kill him.

Soon afterwards Indira and Becky arrived for the day's shift. Both were pleasant-looking 19-year-olds, employed by the ministry to front the café. They did most of the waitressing while Suzanne sweated over the bacon and eggs. Not that we did much trade. The café was kept deliberately dowdy in order not to attract too much custom. Chipped yellow Formica tables and rickety tubular chairs stood on a linoleum floor the colour of mushroom soup. There were banal prints of farmyard animals on the bare brick walls. Not the sort of place you'd frequent unless it was on your commuter route or you had a perverse liking for dreary surroundings and unexceptional transport café cuisine. I'd wanted to call it *The Nick o' Time*, but Rupert wasn't having any of that. Instead we'd settled for the stupefyingly ordinary Golden Egg. I considered Rupert to be the goose that had laid it.

The travellers left shortly after nine o'clock. Downstairs Suzanne and the others were busy with the tail end of the morning rush. I was up in one of the spare rooms, ostensibly to fetch some extra bedding. I had a good view out the window as they went down the side street that led out on to Tottenham Court Road, hatless but their overcoat collars turned up against the cold. They reminded me of Mormon missionaries, sober, upright individuals going out to convert the heathen. Yet their code, as I imagined it, would be quite the reverse: they were here not to save souls but to be witnesses to incidents and events that were already cast in the obdurate stone of their own history.

Patches of frost still dusted the pavement and the blonde women almost slipped and fell. What would happen if they injured themselves and had to go to hospital? Did they have an emergency recall device, some kind of portable matter transmitter? Would we see them wink out in an instant, or shimmer impressively away like something out of *Star Trek* as they dematerialized back up the timeline?

I stayed a safe distance from the window in case one of them happened to look back. The ministry had chosen the site because it was enclosed on three sides by the blank walls of surrounding buildings, enabling the travellers to come and go with minimal scrutiny. When they reached Tottenham Court Road they all went off in separate directions, mingling quite unheeded with the morning bustle. According to Rupert, a good proportion of the travellers were just tourists like Boris who paid for their temporal sightseeing at premium rates which made the whole operation economic. But not this quartet. No, I imagined them as serious professionals, a combination of sociologists, historians and archaeologists. Off on a field trip. To sites of special scientific interest.

They'd locked their doors after them: I always check. Of

course I have a master key but I wouldn't risk going in when Suzanne was around. She's scrupulous about leaving them alone, sticking to the letter of our contract with the ministry. Not that there's ever anything interesting to find. They never hang clothes in the wardrobe, never leave toothbrushes or razors or sanitary towels in the bathroom. The beds are always made, the windows open to air the rooms so that no trace of human scent lingers. Even Boris keeps his underwear locked away. For a while I entertained the idea that they were androids in human disguise until one of our guests put a fork into his lower lip during breakfast and drew blood. Maybe they eat from tubes where he comes from. They're human, all right, but on their own terms. They come and go without a trace.

By lunchtime the café was busy again. In the beginning I used to help out with the serving, but I've got no flair for customer relations, particularly small talk about the weather, politics and sport. Who gives a damn these days? So I stay in the background, preparing sandwiches, baguettes, jacket potatoes. I stink of raw onion and sweet pickle. Some days the relentless pinging of the microwave is enough to make me want to take a sledgehammer to it.

Trade slackens after about 1.30, and we always close for the day at four o'clock. Of course without the income from the travellers the café wouldn't be viable, but Suzanne and I can't complain about the hours. Except that we have too much time on our hands.

I was filling the dishwasher with the third load of the afternoon when Suzanne came through from the front end.

"There's a man here," she announced. "Says he's from the council. Something about access."

Her sceptical tone of voice made me say: "Journalist?"

"I reckon so. Will you talk to him? I've really had enough today."

She looked flushed and frazzled. A spray of baked-bean sauce freckled the breast of her white pinafore.

"No problem."

I went straight through. Indira and Becky were already gone, the chairs upturned on the tables, the floor mopped. Standing beside the hot snack counter was a portly middle-aged man swamped under a green padded jacket. He held a clipboard but was eyeing the surveillance camera mounted above the counter.

"Afternoon," he said cheerily. "Impressive-looking system you've got there."

"We like to know who's coming and going."

"Mr Dancey?"

"That's right."

"Nicholas James Dancey?"

"Oh my gosh," I said in an exaggerated way. "Are you a policeman? Am I in some sort of trouble?"

Immediately there was a big reassuring smile and a: "No, no, no, nothing like that. Henry Lassiter, Westminster Council." He waved the clipboard briefly at me. "It's just a routine Health & Safety visit. We need to check that the place is up to scratch. Extinguishers working, no blockages on fire escapes, proper ease of access, that sort of thing. Just a quick look around, make sure you're OK. Shouldn't take more than ten, fifteen minutes."

I can always spot an actor, particularly an amateur one. They overdo whatever emotion it is they are trying to express – in this case a combination of bonhomie and professional world-weariness.

"I don't think so," I said.

It was clear he hadn't expected this. "You have a legal obligation to ensure your establishment is meeting regulations, Mr Dancey. An informal look-over is much the easiest way. Better than having a full inspection team sent in."

"Are you making this up as you go along?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Lassiter, did you say your name was?" I'd lifted the Yellow Pages from below the counter. It sat right next to the phone. "You don't mind if I ring your office to confirm your visit?"

"There's really no need for this, Mr Dancey."

I punched out the ministry number. Lassiter was already backing away towards the door.

"Did you say your first name was Henry? – Oh, hello, is that the council offices?"

By now he knew that I knew he was a reporter of some sort.

"I'll come again another time," he said, frantically disengaging a jacket toggle from the door handle and jerking the door open.

"No problem," I called as he went out. "We've got the picture."

The phone was still ringing. A single cheese-and-onion pasty sat disconsolate and alone on the top shelf of the counter. If I'd been any sort of real café proprietor I'd have offered him it gratis.

What's the difference between a hyena and a time traveller?

A hyena has the grace to wait until there's actually a corpse.

Of course it's common knowledge that time travellers are visiting, though in this country the government does its best to keep the traffic regulated and "in house." Rumour is that it was a British researcher who had actually been the leader of the team that had constructed the first time machine, three years ago. Not that they'd been able to go anywhere with it. Rather, by building the device (which was apparently more like a room than a machine) they'd created the fixed end of an elastic band that extended along the timeline, making it possible for people in the future to stretch themselves back to any point up to the moment of the invention. Some kind of quantum tunnelling, according to Rupert. Apparently all you had to do was enter a specially configured chamber and you emerged at a pre-specified point down the line.

Once the news got out, people began imagining time travellers everywhere. Their elusiveness only provoked speculation, usually of sensationalist kind. Lurid stories proliferated in which they were accused of everything from rape to abduction to deliberately causing disasters by their mere presence.

It was hard to be indifferent to the knowledge that they were moving amongst us, though people's responses var-

ied widely. Some naturally longed to be taken into the future. (This, according to Rupert, was impossible. Travel up the timeline could only be achieved by Visitors already in the past who possessed the temporal potential energy necessary to get them back to their own eras.) Other people wanted their destinies revealed or yearned for the riches that prior knowledge of winning Lottery numbers would have provided. Others still resented the travellers' unannounced and secretive visits, the creepy idea that if they were moving among you they had come specifically to witness an important event, something that probably involved death and disaster. No wonder they kept themselves as anonymous as possible: there were plenty of people about who would have cheerfully lynched them.

Which is why, no doubt, the government moved swiftly to regulate matters, to set up specific transit zones. Just before Suzanne and I opened the hostel I drove out to the disembarkation centre that had been built near Stansted. It looked like an army camp, with checkpoints, sentry posts and ten-metre high razor wire plastered with NO UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS signs. It's rumoured, though, that such centres are just a cover for smaller zones right in the heart of most urban centres. Rupert won't say. He's bound by the Official Secrets Act – as, he always delights in reminding us, are we.

I suppose it was only a matter of time before investigative reporters got wind of the fact that the Golden Egg is actually a time travellers' hostel. Over the past year we've had visits from people claiming to be electricians, replacement window salesmen, fire prevention officers and even, on one ridiculous occasion, a restaurant critic. Most of them have some form of documentation to support their claims that they need to inspect the establishment. I give the persistent ones the ministry phone number, which I tell them is head office. The operatives at the other end of the line are fully briefed, and they deal with all enquiries in a no-nonsense way, either threatening prosecution on the grounds of national security or offering a juicier apple on which to bite. The latter tactic is increasingly favoured. From the CCTV they had already identified Lassiter (actually his real name) as a freelance journalist who specialized in exposés of the rich and famous. My contact at the other end of the line told me he would be warned off the story but compensated by being given the address of a "pleasure palace" in a suburban house in Beckenham that was frequented by a number of people in the public eye. A dirty business, keeping the channels free from interference.

I'm pretty sure that the government's protectiveness towards the travellers is not simply, as Rupert insists, about avoiding public disorder. My guess is that they've made some deal in which ministers are provided with strategic information about impending events in exchange for free and uninhibited passage. There must be plenty of countries in which the trade isn't regulated, and yet the travellers remain a circumspect lot, rarely making themselves visible to the public eye and swiftly vanishing if accidentally uncovered. Like those creatures you find under stones that wriggle for cover the instant they're exposed to the light.

Leo didn't get back until after six o'clock that evening. He

was glassy-eyed and I could smell the alcohol on his breath the moment he shambled in through the door.

"Where've you been?" I demanded.

"Out."

"That's bloody obvious. Out where?"

"With friends."

"Doing what?"

A shrug. "Just hanging around."

"You were supposed to be helping Suzanne."

"I did."

"For about five seconds. Then buggered off the moment she turned her back on you."

Leo was 17, lanky and uncoordinated, at that age when he looked awkward inside his own skin. His head seemed hunched down on his shoulders, as if he wanted to shrink it into them.

"You're supposed to be helping out," I said again. "Not taking off whenever you feel like it."

He salvaged the lone pasty from the hot tray and began cramming it into his mouth. I resisted the urge to say it had been sitting there for at least six hours. I didn't want to let myself be distracted.

"You need to get a job," I told him. He'd dropped out of sixth-form college the previous summer, despite an excellent set of GCSE results. "Do you think I'm going keep on subsidizing you?"

No answer to this, though he managed an expression of resentful embarrassment. His inarticulacy provoked a sudden fury in me.

"What's happened to you?" I said. "You used to be a good student. You worked hard and you had ambition. What's your ambition now? To be a complete drunken wastrel?"

His pastry-flecked lips began trembling as if he was wrestling with words. Nothing came out.

"Go on," I goaded him. "Say something."

He shook his head and tried to turn away. As I grabbed him I saw there were tears in his eyes.

"Spit it out," I persisted. "What's the hell's the matter with you?"

"Leave me alone!" he cried, wrenching himself free and hurrying through the kitchen. I heard him stumbling heavy-footed up the stairs to his room at the top of the building.

I made to go after him, but Suzanne stepped into the doorway.

"Stop right there," she said quietly.

She was dressed to go out; she ran a children's drama group in Clerkenwell on Friday evenings.

"Nice one," she said.

"What? You're the one he left in the lurch."

"Yelling at him isn't going to help."

"He's bloody surly. Silence is as much a form of defiance as arguing."

"Is it? Maybe he's just afraid to talk to you."

"Did you see the state of him? He's a wreck. He's completely lost the will to do anything meaningful with his life."

"He's just had a few drinks with his mates. He's hardly roaring drunk."

"Why are you sticking up for him?"

"I'm just trying to keep it in proportion, that's all."

"I hate the idea of him wasting himself. I'm his father, for God's sake."

There was a little pause before she said, "Who are you really angry with, Nick? Him or yourself?"

"Oh, very facile," I retorted. "Don't start giving me that cod psychology crap."

"I mean it, Nick. Stop blaming him for all your disappointments."

I heard Leo leave about half an hour later. I didn't try to stop him, though when I checked his room I saw he'd taken his carryall and a change of clothing. Probably gone to seek sanctuary with his mother for a few days. She lived out in Sidcup with her stockbroker husband. We'd split up when Leo was six and I'd been given custody after she went off to Florida for a month and left him with her sister. Leo was always an inconvenience to her as a young child, though their relationship has paradoxically improved in recent years as he's become more independent of her. He'll stay there for a few days, then come back when he gets bored. All of his friends are in London.

The four time travellers returned just before ten o'clock. They let themselves in quietly through the back door with the keys I'd given them, no doubt hoping to retire immediately to their rooms without interference. But I was strategically placed in the hallway as they came in.

"Good day?" I asked them cheerfully.

"Thank you, yes," said one of the men.

"See anything interesting?"

"Indeed," said the man in a neutral tone. "Indeed."

The other heads were nodding respectfully; but no details were vouchsafed.

"Any idea what the weather's going to be tomorrow? I'm playing golf and I was wondering whether I should take my waterproofs."

There was an instant's pause before the blonde woman gave a little burst of laughter. The others joined in, as though humour had suddenly been sanctioned. Then they went off up the stairs. I stood at the bottom until I heard their doors close, one after the other.

Boris came in about an hour later. I heard him singing half drunkenly as he climbed the stairs, bowdlerizing the words of "Shine on, Harvest Moon". For once, I kept out of the way, scared that if I saw him I wouldn't be able to resist acting on my homicidal urges. I wasn't ready to take my revenge just yet.

I had just got into bed when Suzanne returned, full of high spirits. As usual she'd been invigorated by her work with the kids. We'd met eight years before when she was acting professionally. I was producing one of my own plays at the Lyric in Hammersmith and I'd cast her as the female lead after an impressive audition. I started taking Leo along to weekend rehearsals. Suzanne, ten years younger than me, had recently split up from a long-term boyfriend, and we'd already begun what I considered to be a passionate dalliance until I saw how well she got on with the boy. She couldn't have children herself – chemotherapy for leukaemia as a child had left her infertile – but she was a

natural with Leo. It was at this point that our relationship began in earnest, and we married two years later.

I watched her undress while she continued to talk about the kids' enthusiastic reaction to her tutoring. She was never more attractive than when fired with a passionate intensity for her craft.

"Boris is back," I remarked finally. I hadn't mentioned him to her until now.

"Oh? How is he?"

"Eager to see you. I gave him his usual room. He was disappointed you weren't here."

She didn't rise to this. "That makes five. Do you think something's going to happen?"

"Well, Boris reckons he's just here for a decent bath."

Despite our best efforts, we always imagined the travellers had come for some specific purpose, though Rupert was adamant that there was no direct connection between their visits and specific events that would be of historical importance. Only he was more pompous about it, calling it "the fallacy of significance" and insisting that it was better to regard them as "temporal sociologists" engaged in fieldwork. Which made perfect sense if you took a rational, dispassionate view of it. Which was also perfectly impossible in our situation.

"If this goes on," I said, "we'll have to put camper beds in the kitchen."

She said nothing to this, but paused to stare seriously at her naked body in the full-length mirror. I had the impression she was looking for signs of decay. I wanted to get out of bed and hug her but I didn't move. Instead I felt a profound sense of sadness and loss. I had this image of a big stone wheel, slowly but relentlessly turning, grinding everything down, turning diamond into dust.

The travellers were up and away promptly at eight the next morning. They didn't even stop for breakfast, leaving me bereft of the opportunity for more stimulating conversational exchanges. On Saturdays we didn't open the café until nine o'clock and closed it at noon, serving only drinks and snacks, and attracting no more casual trade than the occasional desperate shopper or tourist too bewildered to know better. Suzanne and I had negotiated the hours with Rupert when the hostel was set up, the early closure being designed to give us more time for the continued pursuit of our theatrical interests. But I'd given up that game.

Usually I manned the cake counter in the morning, watching Indira and Becky go about their business. Both are excellent actresses, well educated ministry girls who can talk like Cockney fishwives and give as good as they get in banter with our handful of regulars, the delivery men and junior shop assistants whom I'm sure only patronize the place because of them. The little cameos the girls play out with the customers are all that keeps me acting on periodic urges to decorate the walls with wedges of cheesecake and Black Forest gâteau.

Boris didn't surface until noon. I was ferrying crates of empty soft drinks bottles out into the back yard preparatory to closing. When I returned to the counter I saw him sitting at his favourite table by the window, cradling a cup of coffee. Suzanne was perched opposite

him, laughing at something he'd said. She'd already locked the door and drawn the venetians.

Boris gave me a wave and said, "Nicholas! Come and join us."

I didn't move. "How's your hangover?" I asked him.

He rocked his head. "Not perhaps so bad as I deserve."

"Keeping him company, are we?" I said to Suzanne.

"Boris has asked me to take him to the theatre," she said.

"Oh?"

"Lydia's in *Taming of the Shrew* at the South Bank. Or there's a performance of *Maxwell's Ghost* at the Albery tonight at eight."

Lydia was an actress friend; *Maxwell's Ghost* was a play I'd written several years before, still being produced by another group of friends who seemed to think it was worth it.

"Actors in the raw," Boris said eagerly. "I would very much like to see one of your productions. Your wife has spoken highly of them."

"Not my production," I replied, thinking: *You hypocrite*, and wanting to spit in his face. "Just my play."

"We could go as a threesome," Suzanne suggested.

I shook my head. "Forget it. Saturday's my night off."

I went straight upstairs and spent the next half hour tidying Leo's room, although this was also a pretext to check the drawers and cupboards for any suspicious items. I was worried that Leo might be doing drugs as well as alcohol, but I found no syringes, tablets or dubious packages apart from a brown paper bag stuffed in his old school pencil case that proved to contain three foil-wrapped condoms. I wondered how long they'd been there. Leo didn't appear to have a girlfriend, though he'd told Suzanne that he wanted one.

The four travellers' rooms were locked, but I loitered on the landing. Then the mobile in my jacket pocket started bleeping. I pulled it free.

It was Rupert's number. My thumb hovered over the Cancel button, but in the end I took the call.

"Unborn Youth Hostel," I said.

There was a brief pause, and then Rupert said, "Very droll, Nicholas. I'm pleased to hear that middle-aged respectability hasn't robbed you of your sense of humour."

"I have you to thank for that."

"Listen," said Rupert, suddenly brisk, "we're overdue a progress check. Can you make this afternoon?"

"Well, there is this dinner party—"

"Don't piss about, there's a good fellow. Three o'clock? The usual place?"

"I can't wait."

The line went dead.

I took myself back downstairs. I could hear Suzanne's laughter over the sound of Boris's voice. They were still sitting at the table, Suzanne staring at a small object like a two-legged gyroscope that was doing cartwheels and pirouettes across the Formica with pulses of spectral light.

"The Bear called," I said to Suzanne. "We're meeting at three."

Suzanne put her index finger on top of the object and it went still, its colours fading to silver.

"Dress warm," she said without looking up.

Rupert, with his paunch and black cashmere overcoat, was waiting under the statue of Sir Henry Havelock. We walked slowly around Trafalgar Square among the pigeons and knots of tourists. Any number of them might be time travellers, I reflected. Especially the ones feeding the pigeons.

"So," said Rupert. "How's it all going back at base?"

"A-1," I told him. "With military precision."

He took an ostentatious detour to avoid walking in the line-of-sight of tourists who were posing for photographs.

"How are the new Visitors?"

"Fully house-trained. You'd hardly know they were there."

"Seen much of them, have you?"

"No fear. They keep themselves to themselves. Early to bed, early to rise. I've got a feeling their schedule is packed."

Rupert stopped and made a show of peering around him, taking in the sights.

"Suzanne all right, is she?" he asked.

"Hunky-dory. Boris is back. He's been canoodling with her."

Rupert pretended he hadn't heard this. "Nothing unusual to report?"

"Are you worried about something?"

"No, no, no, my dear boy. One has to check, you know. It's one's duty."

I invariably wanted to punch him when he called me "dear boy" and began talking like a minor Royal. At 50 he was only five years older than I was. Scarcely the elder statesman. A burgundy polka dot scarf was tucked in neatly at his neck. I resisted the temptation to ask him what had happened to the yellow check one I'd bought him as a birthday present the previous year.

We met every few weeks, always in Trafalgar Square, a place that Rupert had declared "public but suitably private." He didn't want to draw attention to the Golden Egg by regular visits, he told me, but felt it important that we should see one another on a regular basis so that he could keep tabs on things. This was typical Civil Service speak, designed, I suspected, to enhance his feelings of authority over me. As far as I knew he was a middle-ranker in the Home Office hierarchy, though something of a self-professed expert on the subject of the time travellers.

I suppose I should have felt grateful to him because he'd offered us the hostel operation when both Suzanne and I were going through a lean period. At the time I couldn't get anyone to stage my plays and Suzanne had lost the opportunity of a role in a TV drama after a protracted lay-off with a fractured shin. I was worried about how I was going to afford to put Leo through university, and Rupert's proposal promised us financial salvation. He needed imaginative but reliable people, he told us, people who could protect the Visitors from the prying public eye. It would be a delicate operation that had to be handled with extreme discretion. We would become employees of the ministry and paid an appropriate salary that would ensure all our financial needs were met. Suzanne and I nodded like grown-ups and accepted after minimal consideration.

And it's true to say that it *has* proved successful in the

sense that we've managed to provide a haven for the travellers in a fairly hostile climate of public opinion. Rupert has hinted that there are other safe houses scattered all over the country, though ours, in a central site in the capital city, is "a prime location." But I can't find it in myself to feel gratitude towards him. When we made the deal he also promised to satisfy our curiosity about the nature and extent of the travellers' visits, as well as shedding light on the variety of philosophical conundrums that the whole issue of time travel raised. In the event he continually managed to avoid telling us anything truly revealing by framing his answers in a civil-service speak that was always hedged with evasions, qualifications and, I suspect, downright lies.

In the beginning I was naturally full of the usual questions. From how far in the future do they come? That, he told us solemnly, was classified information he was not at liberty to reveal. (At the hostel the range was between 80 and 200 years.) How long did they stay? Most of their visits were quite short, amounting to no more than several days, while extended visits were handled by another department to whose files he did not have access. What was the main reason for their visits? It was impossible to give an easy answer to this since they varied from straightforward recreation to serious historical study. Were there common destinations that suggested impending events of importance to the present day? Rupert was unable to say since the Visitors' itineraries were known only to themselves. In any case the question presupposed that significant historical events rested on single crucial moments, a view that in his opinion was misconceived. History was a far more complex and elusive thing, rarely reducible to convenient snapshots.

Rupert's responses to my questions about the paradoxical issues arising from time travel were equally frustrating, even though he was rather more expansive. Could a traveller visit a younger version of himself and hence supply foreknowledge of his future? Rupert denied this was possible, talking of "temporal octaves" and an "exclusion principle" that prevented travel within one's own life span and also duplicate visits by different versions of the same traveller to a particular place. What about going further back and murdering one of their antecedents before they themselves were born? Rupert dismissed the question as a metaphysical speculation of no practical relevance. Assuming that a time traveller was capable of altering past events, then the entire timeline to that travellers' future would be altered, including the memories all of those that had lived. Therefore such knowledge of any changes would be obliterated. Or, if there were branching futures as a result of "anomalous actions" in the past, then they too would be unknown to those in the timeline undisturbed by such actions. It was easier to believe that the past was immutable, the bedrock on which the future rested. Nothing the travellers did there could alter what was already known to be.

A wind had come up, driving empty burger cartons and snack packets across the square. The sky had that bleak winter greyness that promised many more months of the same.

"I could do with a break," I said to Rupert, just for the

hell of it.

He was gazing into the distance his head slightly tilted, as though listening to a conversation on an invisible mobile phone.

"Feeling the strain, old boy?" he said without looking at me.

"Do you know how many cheese rolls I've made in the past week?"

I suspect he knew that I'd always loathed the routine aspects of the job, but I wondered if he had any inkling of how frustrating the continual close proximity to the travellers was, how every new lodger raised the hope in my guarded heart of some dramatic and revelatory gesture, something that would transform the mundane world in which I was mired. And always they signally failed to deliver.

"When's your next vacation due?" Rupert asked.

I realized I didn't know. We'd been given three weeks in the summer, with back-up staff being drafted in to keep the Golden Egg running. Suzanne and I had taken Leo to Corsica on a holiday that had nearly proved disastrous because the boy had spent his whole time either moping or arriving home drunk after bar crawls. All three of us had bickered throughout the stay.

Rupert produced a diminutive electronic organizer into which he began tapping numbers.

"You're due a couple of weeks off at the end of January," he finally announced.

"Whoopee."

He studied me seriously. "Anything I should know?" he asked.

I nodded, pointing to the organizer. "You're using obsolescent technology."

I didn't bother going home after my meeting with Rupert but instead went straight to Maxine's. It was my usual Saturday evening haunt, a club on Old Compton Street where I met up with friends. Well, not friends exactly but rather drinking pals. We would while away the time playing cards or pool while grumbling about the state of the world, a tapestry within which the presence of the time travellers was now inextricably woven.

Maxine poured me a tall gin and tonic the moment she saw me come in through the door.

"Tough week?" she asked without interest as she plopped a wedge of lemon into the glass.

"Don't even ask," I replied.

"Shit's the name of the game."

I nodded sagely. "Buckets of the stuff."

In truth, she didn't want to know. Nobody in this place wanted to know: they were all too wrapped up in their own concerns. Which was how I liked it. Here conversation flowed continually between people, but there was little in the way of real communication in the traditional sense of exchanging and retaining information. We bantered, essayed witticisms, mocked one another with acerbity, secure in the knowledge that most of us would be so drunk by the end of the evening that we would remember nothing of it the next day.

Toby was sitting alone at a table near the dartboard.

"Fancy a game?" he asked as I approached with my drink.

"Naw," I said.

"Just as well. Someone's nicked the darts."

Toby was my age, a physicist by education who had packed in a career with British Nuclear Fuels after a moral crisis. He now ran a second-hand bookshop on the Charing Cross Road. We had a lot in common.

"I've got a new one," he said to me. "How many time travellers does it take to change a light bulb?"

"Go on."

"Do you think they'd be seen dead in a room where the bulb was about to blow?"

Neither of us laughed – laughter is at a premium in Maxine's – but I managed a weary grin. Toby had a constant supply of time-traveller jokes, and yet he was the one person of my acquaintance who resolutely refused to believe in their existence but considered the whole thing to be a charade engineered by world governments to keep the populace preoccupied. He rested his case on the assumption that time travel, if not impossible, was totally impractical because the Earth moved through space as well as time so that travel into the past would cast you up not on terra firma but in the interplanetary void.

I'd tested this notion on Rupert, who dismissed it by saying that time travel involved no movement along the three spatial dimensions but along the fourth-dimensional axis perpendicular to those three. Don't ask me. I've never bothered to suggest this to Toby since he holds his belief with a religious fervour that I wouldn't have the bad manners to threaten. I'm equally sure that if I told him the true nature of the Golden Egg's business he'd laugh in my face. I sometimes think that all our individual opinions and philosophies are nothing more than psychological defence mechanisms designed to reinforce our personal prejudices.

"Drink up," Toby said, sinking the last of his Diamond White. "You're buying."

Soon afterwards we were joined by two other regulars and we settled down to the first of what would prove to be a long session of card games.

I remember quite clearly the point in the evening when I decided to go home and kill Boris. It was late, but we were still playing poker. In front of me was a pile of the cocktail sticks we used as one-penny chips. For once I was winning, but I felt no sense of achievement at all. Toby, even drunker than I, was going on about the fact that if travel to our time was possible from anywhere in the future then the entire country should be swamped with a continual stream of arrivals to the point where no one would be able to move. So where were they?

I was feeling tired and detached. I'd broached this particular objection with Rupert only recently. He'd told me that since foreknowledge of earlier visits existed for those further up the timeline it was a simple matter to avoid congestion by varying the geographical destination from different future eras. As to the perceived lack of ubiquity of the travellers, how were we to know that in the more distant future some other, perhaps more ethereal, means of transportation were not available? Millions of far

future travellers might be swarming amongst us all the time like hosts of unseen angels.

It was stuff like this that I preferred not to dwell on. It was stuff like this that was driving me crazy. I started thinking about Boris, who was unlike any other time traveller – cheerful, informal, loose-tongued. It was Boris whom I had asked the question that had fatally undermined me. Boris, from the relatively near future, who was in a position to know.

I've probably conveyed the impression that I'm a man too cynical to consider anything worthwhile. It wasn't always that way. Once upon a time, and not too long ago, I had faith in the future and plenty of ambition to go with it. Ever since my student days, when I first encountered Ibsen and Beckett and Pinter at university, I'd wanted to be a serious dramatist, a writer of classic plays that would capture eternal verities and speak to audiences in a universal and lasting way. I intended to create a solid body of work that would be indispensable not only to my own time but to future generations. I wanted, in short, the continued acclaim of posterity. And so I was unable to resist asking the drunken Boris, who claimed to be a patron of the arts in his own day, if the name of Nicholas Dancey was known to future generations of theatre goers.

I'll never forget the look he gave me, a look at once befuddled and vacant. Then he shrugged and laughed and shook his head apologetically.

Of course it might have been possible that he was just displaying his ignorance, but I couldn't rid myself of the conviction that it had been an informed and sincere response. For an instant there had been an awkwardness in his face that told me I'd put him on the spot, forced him to say something that he knew would be unpalatable.

Things were never the same after that. What was the point of labouring over creative work when it would ultimately prove as ephemeral as an advertisement for a new model of car? What did any current critical acclaim matter if the greater scheme of things would prove it meant nothing? Disillusionment set in with a vengeance.

And now, in my drunkenness, I was possessed with the certitude that he intended to steal something else from me apart from my self-worth. Suzanne. He was the only traveller to have made repeat visits, and it seemed to me that he had been cosying up to her from the start. They'd gone off to the theatre together, just the two of them, and were probably back home by now and under the sheets together. Suzanne was disenchanted with our relationship; she would be easy prey to the charm and exotic glamour of someone like Boris.

I lurched up from the table and told Maxine to phone me a taxi. Then I headed for the bathroom and threw up in one of the toilets.

Afterwards my head felt clearer than ever, my decision to kill Boris unshakeable. I had the perfect rationale. If Boris was to be murdered by me, then it had already happened just a little further up the timeline, so I was doing no more than enacting my inevitable and immutable destiny. If he was *not* to be murdered, then I would somehow be thwarted, despite my best intentions, so there could be no possible harm in the attempt.

Either way I was absolved of any responsibility since I was merely playing my preordained part in the unfolding tableau of events. Or, if I did kill Boris and initiate a whole new timeline – well again this too was fated. That's the trouble with the concept of the post-existent future: it robs you of your deepest sense of autonomy.

As the taxi carried me home I envisaged myself bursting in and naturally catching Boris and Suzanne in a compromising situation. And then what? Then I would have the moral high ground as well as the justified anger for extreme action. But the idea made me feel slightly queasy. I rather hoped Suzanne could somehow be excluded from the actual moment of killing. I had no desire for her to have to witness all the gory details, or to see me at my very worst.

I got the driver to drop me at the entrance to the alleyway. The hostel was in darkness, not a single light showing in any of the windows. This redoubled my conviction that something secretive was going on. With the sedulous furtiveness of the drunk I crept down the narrow path, turned my key in the back door and entered.

Nothing. Just silence and darkness. Suzanne was not in the living room, or anywhere else downstairs. I was certain she was with Boris, ensconced in his room.

I went into the kitchen and snatched up the first two knives I could lay my hands on. The first was a short parer, the second a carver with a broad triangular blade. I picked up two because of the absurd conviction that being doubly armed was the only way of being certain I could finish the job, though I certainly wasn't intending to start slicing slabs of flesh off Boris. I imagined that two emphatic thrusts would do it.

I crept up the stairs with a knife in each hand, the blades pointing straight out in front of me. To any throng of disembodied travellers from the remote future I must have looked like some farcical character from a cheap melodrama. I rather hoped they were there. This was my date with posterity. I would be the first person to murder a time traveller, at least as far as I knew. Surely that would be some sort of claim to lasting fame?

A dim light was seeping out from under Boris's door. I put my ear to the panel and listened. I was certain I could hear soft male grunting sounds.

Rage boiled up in me all over again. Without letting go of the paring knife I turned the knob. The door wasn't locked. I eased it open a crack. Then I gripped both knives securely and burst in.

When Suzanne later asked me why I did it, I told her it was out of jealousy. Which is actually true. After it was all over I started blubbing like a child. They were mostly tears of relief.

It was the startled look on Boris's face that stopped me – this, and the fact that he was squatting naked on his bed in a contorted lotus position, trimming his toenails with a stubby pair of scissors. When he saw the knives an expression of sheer terror transfused his face. Though I was drunk I realized that he hadn't known I was coming. But surely a time traveller killed in the past would have had foreknowledge of his own death? In which case

there probably wasn't any historical record of it. Which meant that I hadn't actually killed him.

The whole situation suddenly seemed to me so farcical that I started laughing. I managed to hold out the knives in a less aggressive way and, pointing to his toenails, say, "These any use?"

Unsurprisingly, Boris was not amused. He snatched the duvet around himself to hide his nakedness and sat there cowering, looking at me as if I was insane. Which, for a short period, I suppose I had been. Then he started yelling for help.

The first person to arrive was the blonde woman. None of the other travellers showed. When she appeared in the doorway she froze.

In my paranoia I supposed that she had stopped herself because she wasn't allowed to do anything to influence events. But then she was elbowed aside as first Suzanne, then Leo, burst into the room.

Suzanne's hair was awry, her dressing gown hastily wrapped around her. I later learned she had been fast asleep in our bedroom.

"Nick?" she said. "What the hell is going on?"

I gave a stupid shrug.

She looked from me to Boris, then back again.

"Give me the knives," she said gently.

"No problem." I passed them over very carefully, handles first.

In her face I could see a mixture of fear, confusion and, worst of all, sorrow.

"There's nothing to worry about," I told her, though my voice sounded wobbly. "I thought Boris was doing a spot of after-hours entertainment in here."

Boris was still cowering on the bed, speechless for once. I noticed that the blonde woman was already gone. Then Leo rushed forward and bundled me to the floor in a clumsy combination of a bear hug and a judo lunge.

"Dad, dad, dad," he started saying in a strangled tone.

"My hero," I said, patting his shoulders. "I didn't know you were back."

"Mum was out. Are you having a breakdown?"

Suzanne squatted down beside us. Her eyes looked wet. She knew what had been in my mind.

"You dipstick," she said.

"I know."

"What's going on?" Leo asked, looking a little claustrophobic under the tenacity of my embrace.

"Dark night of the soul," I managed to say from the deep indignity of my position.

It turned out that Boris wasn't actually a time traveller at all but a mole put in by the ministry to keep an eye on things. Apparently he travelled around all the secret hostels, a roving inspector whose job it was to ensure that everything was being run according to ministry guidelines – no collusion with the travellers, no abuse of their privacy, that sort of thing. He'd adopted a clever disguise. An actor within an actor. I'm annoyed I didn't spot it. I bet the spider tattoo is fake too, probably a transfer he applied each time he visited.

Both Boris and our quartet of travellers were gone by the

time I belatedly rose the following morning. Given the blonde woman's reaction it was clear that none of them had known that I going to be creeping about in the dead of night with a pair of knives. I suppose it's hardly surprising. With so much history to explore, you have to be selective. And it's impossible to know all the minutiae even then. Maybe history is little more than a series of snapshots, with lots of interesting stuff being lost simply because it didn't catch the eye of the person with the camera.

The ministry gave me three months off for bad behaviour. Suzanne and I spent the first half of it in New Zealand, staying out in the wilds near Christchurch with her younger brother. We took Leo along as well. We did lots of active sporty things like hang-gliding and white-water rafting, though Leo and Suzanne failed to persuade me that the thrill of a bungee-jump down a terrifying gorge was worth experiencing. Leo had a great time; he even met a girl, with whom he's still in daily contact through the Web. Suzanne reckons the boy's spirits began to lift the moment mine did. I'm sure the equation isn't that simple, but I have to admit that I've hardly been a good role model for him in the past couple of years. When we returned to London he got a job in the Virgin store on Oxford Street. He's talking about going to college next autumn, though he still hasn't a clue what he wants to do. But it's progress.

And me? I've written a new play called *Doing Time*. It's in rehearsals at the Duchess while Suzanne and I take an extended leave of absence from the Golden Egg. Suzanne's in the lead role. I got the notion during a stopover in Australia, and not surprisingly it involves time travel. It's set in a benighted country where the visitors from the future all turn out to be recalcitrant characters because they've been forcibly transported down the line as a punishment for varying degrees of anti-social behaviour. The place is a dumping ground for petty criminals. Needless to say it's a farce.

It wouldn't surprise me if we get a few real time travellers in the audience when the play finally opens: after all, they must be curious about what we really think of them. Not that I'll be counting heads in the audiences, even as a parlour game. I've ceased to concern myself with the future, at least in the sense of worrying about my reputation. Posterity? What's it ever done for me?

Christopher Evans, who lives in London, last appeared in *Interzone* with "Da Capo" (issue 174). A teacher by profession, he is the author of the linked short-story collection *Chimeras* (1992; much of it first published in *IZ*) and the sf novels *Aztec Century* (1993) – a BSFA Award-winner in 1994 – and *Mortal Remains* (1995), plus a number of other books which have appeared since the early 1980s.

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Early Retirement

Mat Coward

“We will make a bonfire of our ills,” said the leader. “And we will keep watch together as all that troubles us ignites and dies and flies to the heavens – destroyed by flame and human will, rendered as insubstantial as the smoke that carries it.”

“This is shit,” whispered Frank. “Total shit-stained shit.”

“I know,” I said. “But let’s do it anyway. The sooner it’s done, the sooner it’s done.” I was Frank’s boss, nominally. It was up to me to keep him in line.

We were each given six pieces of paper, on which to write our six “ills.”

I heard a young woman, somewhere in the darkness away to my left ask, “What happens if we got more than six?” Another, somewhat older and smokier, female voice answered: “Pick the six worst, sweetheart. Or the six most recent.”

I was having the opposite problem. What do you do if you can’t manage six? I started off OK, with *My ex-wife wishes I was dead* on the first slip, and *My ex-son (as he likes to be known) wishes I had terminal cancer of the slowest possible kind* on the second. But after that...

An old drinking companion told me once that the great thing about having big problems is that they take up the whole of the worrying part of your mind. Little things no longer have the power to hurt, frighten or even irritate you. At the time, I thought what he said sounded wise, but I didn’t really know what it meant. I knew now.

I was about to crumple up the remaining four pieces of paper, when Frank leant right into my ear and said: “You really believe they’re going to burn these without reading them?”

I could smell whisky on him. Amazing: in the middle of a forest in the middle of Scotland living in log cabins and eating roots and berries and wearing togas and still Frank manages to find a drink. He could’ve been Chairman of the Board if he’d shown that kind of dedication to Marketing and Promotions, the department in which we both worked.

“What do you mean? Why would they read them?”

“I don’t know. It’s just – well, I was going to write down the names of the last six horses I backed. But then it struck me, suppose this is all part of the assessment programme. So,” he was scribbling as he spoke, using his

knee to rest the paper, “look what I came up with.”

Frank sniggered like a rude kid and passed me his slips. The first one read: “I fear that I am not working hard enough, although I have not taken any of my leave allowance in the last 13 months and I work every weekend.” The second one read: “I fear retirement, because my love for the company is the only pure thing in my life.” The third one –

“Don’t show your ills slips to anyone else,” barked the leader, looking straight at Frank and me, across the still young bonfire. Frank mumbled, and took his slips back from me, as discreetly as he could. Like a boy scout palming a cigarette.

I couldn’t break my eyes away from the leader’s glare. That man terrified me, and had done since the first moment of our arrival at his camp.

He dressed like a standard-issue guru. Saffron robes, big bead necklace. Sandals, in the summer heat. But in place of long greying hair, he wore a military-style salt and pepper crew-cut. Instead of a deific beard, a square and clean-shaven fighting man’s jaw. No Buddha’s belly pushed against the cotton of his tunic: the leader didn’t carry a spare ounce of fat, or a square inch that wasn’t muscled. He looked like an SAS major dressed as a hippy for an undercover sting.

Back in the world, such a sight – such a concept – would have been comical. Even to me, and I hadn’t been doing much laughing in recent months. But here, at the Total Rediscovery Retreat, he was a king in his kingdom. And he terrified me. His gaze seemed to reach out and plant a fear-bomb right down inside my guts, from where no amount of retching would ever dislodge it.

On the first day he had introduced himself to us, his assembled temporary subjects, as “The facilitator – small ‘t’ small ‘f,’ for there are no big men here in the forest.”

Frank had said, scornfully, that if the guy wanted to prove he was just one of us, then he could have told us to call him Bob or Jim. “Anyone who needs a title,” said Frank, my eternally unpromoted friend, “is by definition a nobody.” That’s when we started calling him the leader. Small ‘l,’ of course. You ridicule what scares you, don’t you? We’ve been doing that since we all lived in caves. We’ll be doing it still when we all live in caves again.

To hell with this, I thought. The leader was the first person or thing that had really scared me since my wife and I split up. The One Big Worry of my old boozing pal's theory was no longer enough. The leader was opening me up again, allowing all the minor nags and scares of everyday life to wriggle their way back in.

To hell with this, and I quickly filled in my four remaining slips of paper, before I could change my mind.

3: *My job is eating my life.*

4: *I hate my life. I have no life.*

5: *I fear my chronic problem with piles is about to flare up again.*

6: *My company has sent me on a stupid team-building exercise in the middle of Scotland, on my own time, strictly voluntary but compulsory, and it's lead by a fascist wearing saffron robes.*

"What did you write?" said Frank.

"Nothing," I said. "Who cares? They're only going to burn them, anyway."

The leader's two assistants, one male one female, younger, less impressive versions of himself, walked slowly around the bonfire, collecting the ill slips from the twelve men and nine women. When they reached me, I folded my slips into one lump and pressed them firmly down into the wooden bowl proffered by the acolytes.

Frank stared at the bowl for a moment, then looked over at me, his face pale in the firelight.

"Go on," I said. "It's just a silly ritual."

He shook his head, and reached into the bowl as if he was going to take something out. Instead, he rummaged around for a second, and I saw what he was doing: burying his ill slips under other people's, so that they wouldn't be near the top.

"There's redundancies coming," said Frank. "I know it. I know the signs. I can smell the fear."

"Well..." I said, and I shrugged. I knew things about that, that Frank wasn't allowed to know. My reward for that extra burden was earning £2,000 a year more than he did. And maybe a tiny bit more job security – though not enough to count any chickens with.

"I'll be out this time," he said. "I survived the last lot, and I know I owe you for that, Gordon. But they'll have me this time."

I chose my words carefully. "Well, Frank, think about it – even if they do let you go, you're going to get quite a tasty deal. I mean, shit, you've been with the firm for more than 20 years. It'd be more like early retirement than actual redundancy."

He smiled at me then, as if I was a nice guy in a pub who didn't get what was going on, but was a nice guy all the same. "I'll never work again, Gordon. I'm past middle-age, I'm tired, and nobody will ever employ me to do anything ever again."

He fished around beneath his toga and produced a pewter flask – from his underpants presumably. He took a swig, and put the flask back. He didn't offer me any. If he had, I'd have accepted.

The acolytes had completed their rounds, and now stood before the leader, holding the wooden bowl jointly before them. It was an absurdly ceremonial moment, as

they submitted our offerings. The leader took the bowl, bowed his head over it and closed his eyes.

"Christ," I blurted, "I really hope he doesn't read them!"

Frank choked out a husky laugh. "That makes two of us, pal." He looked around the clearing, at the 19 nervous faces flickeringly outlined in the fire's glow, and he laughed again, more easily this time. "Correction: that makes 21 of us." He slapped me on the thigh and added: "That's one comfort, anyway."

"What is?"

"At least we're all in the same boat, right?"

"Yes," I said. "I suppose that's true." I meant nothing by the words. They were just something to say, to keep Frank happy, to keep me from worrying about the small things of life.

We'd been on one of these bonding weekends before, Frank and I, a few years earlier, but it had been considerably less weird than this one was proving to be. Back then, the whole racket was in its infancy in the UK, just another crazy American idea imported by managers with more ambition than brains. We'd done role-playing, a little gentle rock climbing, some children's games, listened to a lot of harmless psychobabble. And then we'd gone home, and forgotten about it. All we'd taken away from it was some mild embarrassment, an enhanced sense of our own worthlessness, and one or two coughs and colds. But none of us had disgraced ourselves terminally in the eyes of our employers, and that was all that mattered, of course. That's all that ever matters, I remember Frank saying to me at the time. You can call yourself middle-class or working-class or kiss-my-arse, but it's all the same in the end. If they pay your wages, they own you. That's why they send you on "voluntary" courses at weekends: to rub it in.

This present course was altogether more bizarre, and more disturbing, because – well, because we hadn't really done anything. This was the final night – we'd be off back to the world tomorrow at dawn – and in the previous two and a half days, we'd done nothing.

On arrival, we'd been assigned our lodgings, three to a stark but not especially uncomfortable log cabin. Each section of the company was represented by one cabin. There we had, as instructed, changed from our own clothes into the togas laid out for us on our bunks.

There had been an informal induction session in a larger cabin – the only one that would have been big enough to host communal activities, had there been any communal activities. The leader had welcomed us to the Total Rediscovery Retreat, told us to relax, to enjoy ourselves, and expressed the certainty that we would all leave here better adjusted: more integrated, fully wholized individuals. Those of us who still thought we had careers ahead of us, instead of wasted lives behind us, nodded enthusiastically and tried to look as if the integration and adjustment had already begun.

But after that we seemed to be left entirely to our own devices. Nobody told us what to do, and in any case there was nothing to do. No facilities, no activities, no programme. Just a load of log cabins, miles from anywhere,

and a blackened circle in the middle of the clearance, where fires had obviously been built.

We milled around for a few hours, until one of the younger women asked a passing acolyte about meal times.

"It's pretty much self-service around here," was the reply, in a piercingly upper-crust accent.

"No problem," said a management trainee from Forward Planning. "So where's the nosh-house?"

The acolyte gave a superior smile, and turned an elegant circle, her arms outstretched. "You're standing in it." She smiled again, and went off about her unknowable duties.

"For God's sake," said Frank. "They expect us to live off the bloody land."

"Looks like it," I agreed.

"I'm a white-collar drunk," Frank protested. "Not a sodding hunter-gatherer."

Without any general discussion, and sticking to our departmental divisions, we wandered off in twos and threes, into the surrounding trees, in search of... we had no real idea what we searching for.

"Nuts and bloody berries, I suppose," said Frank.

"Roots," said John, the 23-year-old high-flier who was the third inmate of our cabin. "You can eat roots, can't you? I read somewhere, I think."

Frank and I ignored him.

We walked aimlessly for about three minutes, and almost fell over our lunch.

At the base of a tree lay a china plate, heaped with blackberries, cobnuts, tiny wild strawberries, roasted chestnuts, and what looked like anaemic potatoes, or withered carrots.

"They're taking the piss," said Frank.

"There you are," said John. "Edible roots. I knew it."

The plate was sitting on an envelope. Inside was the message "Day One Lunch For Cabin Seven."

"Not ours," I said. "We're Cabin Nine, right?"

"Right," said John. We ignored him, Frank and I; looked at each other.

"Bollocks to that," said Frank. "We eat theirs, they eat ours, what does it matter? Besides, I'm not trudging around these woods on an empty stomach any longer. I've got a heart condition, remember? By rights, I shouldn't even be here, I should be at home practising my stress management."

"You're right," I said. "We'll have it. If anyone asks, we can say we didn't want to risk you having another turn with your heart."

Not that anybody ever did ask. Three times a day, we came out to the same tree, found the same plate piled with the same selection of fruits, nuts and roots, and ate them with our hands, sitting on our arses in the middle of a forest in the middle of Scotland.

If this was supposed to be team-building – encouraging initiative, helping to meld the disparate parts of the workforce into one united whole – then I couldn't see it. Not that I gave a damn. It'd soon be over, and I'd be able to go home (or rather, to the crummy little flat I called home since my divorce), and get ready for another week doing a job I hated with all my heart and was terrified of losing.

The leader opened his eyes, stepped up onto the small hump of rock which served as his podium, and raised the bowl of ill lists above his head. He paused there for a second, then tipped the lists into the flames without looking at them. A wave of suppressed relief sighed around the bonfire.

"Watch them burn!" he called. "Watch them burn, see them go, know you are free! Your cares, your worries, your fears, your guilts, all your ills, ladies and gentlemen – your own will has expelled them, the flames have wiped them, and the smoke has carried them away. Tomorrow you will return to your lives, with your secret burdens eased. Watch them burn!"

We watched them burn.

"Total crap," growled Frank. "One whole weekend out of our lives, gone forever. Watch it burn."

"An early start tomorrow," said the leader, "so an early night tonight."

We all started clambering to our feet, brushing twigs and moss and earth from our togas, giving those nearest us tiny grins of pretend triumph. It was over: we'd survived. We could get back to our lives.

"But first," the leader said, raising his voice slightly above the gathering murmur. "All of those who wrote on their slips that they feared redundancy, come here and stand by me."

People froze where they were. Nobody moved, nobody spoke.

The leader clapped his hands together, three times. "Quickly, now! There were seven of you. Come and stand by me, at the double, please."

"What does he mean," Frank whispered, "there were seven of you?"

I shrugged. He'd burnt the slips without looking at them. I'd seen him do it.

With sheepish smiles, and apologetic postures, one by one people began to drift over to the leader's rock.

"Quickly, please!" he clapped his hands again, and now there was nothing of the hippy about him. Nothing comical at all.

"He's bluffing," said Frank. "Stupid idiots."

"Obviously," I agreed. Nonetheless, there were now four men and two women standing by him, not looking at each other; looking into the flames. They seemed small, next to the leader, next to the fire. Diminished by shame and fear.

"And the seventh?" said the leader, into the silence. "Where is the seventh?"

"Just bluffing," Frank said again, and I grunted agreement. I hadn't told Frank – could hardly tell him, now – that I knew that management planned to announce seven compulsory redundancies when we got back to the office the next day.

The leader stood before us. I hadn't noticed him approach, I'd been lost in thought, but now he stood, looking down at us from his military height, his backbone straight, his face expressionless.

"Frank," he said, and he handed Frank a slip of paper.

"Jesus!" Frank cried. "Look – I didn't – this is some kind of – I didn't write this!"

"It's your handwriting, Frank," said the leader. He took the slip back, and gave it to me. "Isn't that Frank's handwriting, Gordon?"

I fear redundancy, it said, and I fear death, and I fear them in that order.

"It's – well," I said, keeping my eyes on the paper, not looking anywhere else. "It's hard to say. It does, sort of, look like Frank's writing, yes."

"I didn't write it," said Frank. "I'm not crazy, do you think I'm going to give the bastards a weapon like that to use against me? Gordon, for Christ's sake, I didn't write it!"

But he went with the leader peaceably enough, all the same; the tall man's guiding hand on his sunken shoulder.

When all the seven were finally corralled, the leader pointed towards the large hut, the one that didn't seem to be used for any purpose after induction, and said "Go in there. And wait."

All seven did as they were told. They moved slowly, but not because they were being insubordinate: quite the opposite. The acolytes followed them, and when the seven were inside, the acolytes produced a sturdy log with which they barred the door to the big hut from outside. There were no windows.

We waited, but no sound escaped the cabin.

"You have no way of knowing what is happening in there," said the leader, from atop his rock. "And you will not be told. You will find out what has happened, once it has happened. That might be five minutes from now, or five hours. By then, of course it will be too late."

A few of the survivors were looking at each other now. Nervous glances which hardened into unspoken questions and urgent messages. I kept my eyes to myself. Only seven redundancies. If that was all there were going to be, then I was safe for another year.

"It might be something terrible," the leader continued. "Or it might be nothing. Perhaps they are simply sitting there, now, enjoying a cup of coffee and a cigarette. Perhaps. Or perhaps they are already dead."

I heard someone crying. I thought it was a woman from the sound, but when I looked it was a man. I didn't know him – not to speak to, anyway. He wasn't in my section, or in my department. A woman was comforting him.

"The bar across the door," said the leader, "is it there to keep them in or to keep you out? Perhaps, collectively, you will decide to release your colleagues from whatever it is that their imprisonment entails. You are free to decide as you will: as are all unchained humans, at all times. And after all, there are only three of us – myself and my two assistants. But note this: if you do attempt to free them, and you fail, then you will join them."

"Bloody weird role-playing, this," said John, by my left shoulder.

I couldn't ignore him now; he was the only friend I had left. "I don't think this is role-playing, John," I said.

He looked puzzled. "No? What is it then?"

"Something else," I said.

For perhaps an hour, we waited. Someone lit a cigarette, and passed it around like a joint. No sound came from the big hut. No one spoke.

After that long time – a period during which I felt as if I'd died, and discovered that death was no different from life, just quieter – the leader remounted his rock, and addressed us again.

"You did nothing," he said. "You had no idea what was being done to your colleagues, and you did nothing. You sat, you waited. You did not act, collectively or individually. Remember this forever, ladies and gentlemen. All of you – your management has authorized me to tell you that your jobs are safe. Because you did nothing. Remember that."

All I could think was: he said my job was safe. Safe! He wouldn't lie about that, would he?

"Now," he said, "let us discover what has happened to those whose jobs are not safe. And then there is one more act of self-cleansing which you must perform, before you can be truly free of the spiritual burdens you brought with you to this place."

As he spoke, his acolytes were damping down the bonfire with beaters. The loss of heat and light in the little clearance seemed disproportionately sudden. I stood, and rubbed my arms against my sides. I realized that I was alone, a good few yards from any of the others – some of whom, I saw now, were whispering together in the shadows, in small knots of four or five. The nearest to me was John, also standing alone. My apartness was deliberate – I didn't know these people, didn't trust them – but just because you do something deliberately doesn't automatically mean that you find it comfortable.

The leader looked at us – each of us, in turn. "You do not yet know, but will shortly find out, whether your colleagues are alive or dead. In a moment, you will know. But before I allow you to enter the cabin, you must first agree to this one last deed of transformation. If they are dead, you will eat them."

"Oh God," moaned John. "What does he mean?"

"Remember: when they were dying, or not dying, you did nothing. Now, one way or the other, it is too late. Nothing you do to them now can make any difference. To refuse this last task would be meaningless, in the light of what you have not done this past hour."

The leader led us to the large cabin. His acolytes removed the bar from the door. He led us in.

It was as I had expected. They were all dead.

The seven of them, my ex-colleagues, they were slumped against the walls, their mouths hanging open, their eyes closed. They were all dead.

"They're alive," said the man who had been crying earlier. He was kneeling, feeling pulses on first one body, then another. "They're unconscious, they've been gassed or something, but they're alive!"

Others pushed forward, confirmed what their colleague had said. "They're alive!"

I found Frank, near the back. I knelt by him – my old friend, alive! It seemed like a miracle: not dead, just redundant. I felt for his pulse, for breath, for signs of life. There were none. His lips were blue.

His heart had died. The leader had not killed these people, but Frank was dead, even so.

"Frank's dead," I said. "He's not unconscious, he's dead. God help me, Frank's dead."

No one heard me. No one was listening. The young man who had been crying earlier was crying again, but this time with tears of rage. "This fucking madness has gone on long enough," he said, and several others shouted in agreement. "We're getting these people onto the coach, and we're taking them straight to hospital, and we're doing it now. Right? And anyone who tries to stop us gets what's coming to them."

There were united yells of anger. The survivors began to drag the redundant ones from the cabin, into the light and the air. It didn't take them long, working in concert. A group of them broke away, to go and hunt for the coach that had brought us all here from the station.

"Leave them where they are!" roared the leader. "You are not yet dismissed. You are still under my—"

The silencing of the leader was sudden and absolute. A stone smashed into his face, a face which just had time to register astonishment, and he fell to the ground. As he fell, three or four survivors crowded round him, kicking and stamping. His two acolytes dashed for the door, and into the clearing.

"After them!" two survivors shouted simultaneously.

John and three others gave chase, but John paused at the door, looked back at me. "Come on Gordon, they're getting away."

I hesitated. Should I go with the others? Join with them? The company hadn't meant anyone to die here. Frank's death was an accident, unforeseeable. Not the company's fault. The company had wanted him redundant, not dead.

I hesitated. I had to choose one side or the other, I knew that. Either I was with the others – or I was with the company.

I looked over at the leader, where he lay forgotten for the moment, blood pooling around his head. He wasn't dead. He looked straight at me, and I felt the fear deep in my guts uncurl and flex itself. He would report what had happened here, and the others would lose their jobs. All of them. All of us. We wouldn't be survivors: we'd be redundant.

I hesitated, and the moment of decision passed. I heard the coach start up, and I listened as its engine trailed away into the distance.

I had no wife, I had no son, I lived in a one-room flat with invisible neighbours, and I had a job. I had a job, you see? As long as I had a job, I still existed.

I turned it over in my mind, eyes shut and lips moving, and the way I worked it out was this: if Frank was still alive, I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't go that far. I wasn't that desperate, that defeated, that pathetic, that I would eat a friend alive. Not a friend, not a guy I'd known for years. I wouldn't do that.

But since Frank was already dead, it couldn't make much difference. Could it? Really? "I'm sorry, Frank," I said aloud, but not loudly. "I'm sorry, old mate, but it's not as if you can feel anything now."

I looked over at the leader again, to make sure he was

still watching me. He was. There were three of us left in the cabin. Three: and one of those was already dead.

And I knelt down beside Frank's body and I took hold of his right upper arm in both my hands and I sank my teeth into the limp, yellowish flesh.

It's harder than it sounds, eating someone. My ex-son used to tell me that humans aren't designed to eat meat, our jaws and teeth are built for grinding, not for tearing, and in that moment I understood what he meant. My teeth were middle-aged, in any case, half of them mere shells filled with amalgam, held in receding gums. They were not the teeth of a young man, of a high flier, of someone who had a career ahead of him. They were defeated teeth, the teeth of a redundant carnivore.

But my teeth were all the hope I had now, and so I tried again, this time lifting Frank's toga and biting into the softer flesh of his belly.

The leader can't have expected us to actually eat our ex-colleagues, I thought. Not really – couldn't have meant us to tear them apart, chew them up, swallow them, crunch their bones, slurp their soft tissue, digest them, shit them out. It'd be more a symbolic thing: just tear a bit off, an emblematic ounce of flesh, show that you're willing to do whatever has to be done.

But even that, for a while, seemed to be beyond me. I thought I had failed, lost everything, but then, at last, summoning all my energy, all the will I'd ever possessed, I managed to achieve just sufficient purchase on Frank's belly – and a fragment of skin, barely enough to wrap a baby's fist, came away in my teeth.

I spat it into my palm, and scrambled over to where the leader lay. I wanted to show him my trophy, I wanted him to acknowledge that I had done whatever it took, and that I had won the prize. That I was safe.

He couldn't. He was dead. Had died of blood loss while I was trying to eat Frank. The leader had lied: he'd said our jobs were safe if we did what we were told, but I had done it and there was no one left to witness my obedience.

I stumbled outside, and sat alone by the dead fire in the empty clearing.

I sat for quite a while, my jaw aching and my brain drifting, unmoored in my head. When I felt able to stand again, I re-entered the cabin, took hold of Frank's corpse by the ankles, and began to drag it towards where I guessed the nearest road might be. I had to stop every few yards to rest. It would take me hours to get back to the world, supposing I ever got back at all. But I couldn't just leave Frank there to rot.

I had to carry his body home, so that if one day my ex-son were to ask me *What did you do to stop it happening?*, although I'd have to say *Nothing*, I'd be able to add: "But at least I didn't leave my friend behind when he was dead."

Mat Coward, who lives in Frome, Somerset, last appeared in *Interzone* with "Time Spent in Reconnaissance" (issue 181). His previous stories were "We All Saw It" (issue 155) and "The Second Question" (issue 169). He is a frequent contributor to crime-fiction publications, but seems to be turning more and more to sf and tales of psychological horror.

Here we go again. The *Daily Mail* (21 June) knows exactly which damning point about a convicted murderer needs to be mentioned first: "Science fiction fanatic Christopher Hunnisett drowned the Rev Ronald Glazebrook in his bath before dismembering his body with an axe and saw."

THE SECRET MASTERS

John Jarrold left his editorial post at Simon & Schuster UK in August. "I have had a wonderful five years here, and launching the Earthlight imprint in April 1998 was one of the great achievements of my career. However, there are always times when moving on becomes one's best option, and that is what I am now doing." Mike Moorcock: "I am not prepared to deal with another editor, so I too will be leaving Simon & Schuster. All the staff who were there when I first joined are now gone..." Other authors in the Jarrold stable are likewise filled with gloom.

Diana Wynne Jones underwent yet another operation in late June, to remove a tumour which the surgeon thought had a 95% chance of being malignant. All went well, and biopsy results in July said it wasn't malignant after all.

Sam J. Lundwall is charmed that the Swedish government has declared him a Living National Treasure worthy of a "Garanterad författarpension," a guaranteed income for selected authors until age 70, when it's replaced by a special author's pension. "The government is paying me a salary for doing whatever I like... Who could ever have thought that a science-fiction writer should get a salary from the cultural establishment to write this Buck Rogers stuff?" Britain, as Terry Pratchett and J. K. Rowling know, prefers to hand out state honours with no sordid money attached.

Alan Moore's graphic novel *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* may not be entirely recognizable in the planned live-action film. Screenwriter James Robinson grumbles that this alternate-Victorian *X-Men* team comprises two psychopaths (Jekyll/Hyde, the Invisible Man), a drug addict (Allan Quatermain), and "a sort of sexually ambivalent vampire girl" (Mina Harker from *Dracula*), leaving only Captain Nemo (who seemed fairly psychopathic to me) to engage our sympathies. Therefore, that nice all-American boy Tom Sawyer must be added... while of course the arch-villain Dr Fu Manchu gets the chop as a "potentially volatile racial stereotype." A correspondent who's read the script claims that the replacement villain is the Phantom of



the Opera, improbably equipped with an army of thugs and a secret Mongolian fortress.

Peter Nicholls, co-editor of *The Encyclopedia of SF*, is the subject of a hour-long documentary in his native Australia: *The What If Man: The Science Fictional Life of Peter Nicholls* (premiere screening July, national TV showing to follow).

M. J. Simpson reports from the Douglas Adams biographical workbench: "Have just finished first draft of *Hitchhiker* and it's a mere 48,000 words over my contracted wordcount. I believe I can reduce this to an acceptable level by deleting 'actually' and 'sort of' from all the Adams quotes."

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

As Others See Us. *The New Yorker* (17 June) ran a merry article on the hobby of its retired editor Gardner Botsford, who collects books so specialized that "they have an audience of three." These amusingly bizarre titles include *Haikus for Jews*, *Creative Insomnia*, *Successful Fund Raising Sermons*, *Knitting With Dog Hair* and, alas, *The Best of Stanley G. Weinbaum*. • A film press pack plays the traditional "not sf" card: "Minority Report is not Science Fiction, it's Future Reality!"

R.I.P. Herman Cohen (1927-2002), US producer of such cult films as *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, *Blood of Dracula* and *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein* (all 1957), died from throat cancer on 2 June. Other sources give birth year 1925, or 1928.

Are They Sure? From a *Guardian* tourism supplement: "Many of New Zealand's species of wildlife are unique to this planet."

Strange Web Stuff. *Richard Calder* was disconcerted by the supposed free extract from his *Lord Soho* on the Earthlight website, totally unfamiliar to him. Who was "Tristan Talisker – Thane of Soulis Mor"? It was in fact the prologue of a very different fantasy, Miller Lau's *Dark Thane*. • *Greg Egan* has a vital correction to his novel *Diaspora*, whose 17th chapter laughably refers to "Poincaré's rotational 'pole' – the two-dimensional sphere on the hypersurface that stayed fixed in space as the star rotated." The author's website warns that this is in fact an unlikely situation in 5-dimensional space, and that it's more probable that there would be "two single-point rotational poles, as in 3 dimensions." Thog's Higher Mathematical Masterclass is deprived of its prey. • *David Pringle* of *Interzone* would be more flattered by the discovery that early issues from 1982 are now priced at £85 sterling, if the online vendor didn't describe IZ as a "short-lived English horror and fantasy magazine."

Science Corner. "Hollywood has breathed new life into H. G. Wells's innovative sci-fi novel *The Time Machine*. [...] While physicians continue to find ways to time travel, others claim to have done so unintentionally." (Jem Maidment, "Is Time Travel Possible?", ITV1 Teletext)

Awards. *Campbell Memorial*: tie between *Terraforming Earth* by Jack Williamson and *The Chronoliths* by Robert Charles Wilson. Williamson, now 94, says *Terraforming Earth* will be his last novel. • *Sturgeon* for short story: "The Chief Designer" by Andy Duncan (*Asimov's* 6/01). • *Bram Stoker* for horror: *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman won as best novel, and *Deadliest of the Species* by Michael Oliveri as best first novel.

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Microbiology*. "... Did men have goals in common, in your day, save to keep on breathing, eating and reproducing?" / I grunted. "Goals shared with the lowest bacillus." (Stephen Baxter, *The Time Ships*, 1995) • "Her brother's twitching eyes and bared buck teeth gave him the look of a gopher on pure crystal meth, capable of anything, one way or the other." (S. M. Stirling, *Island in the Sea of Time*, 1998) • "When he spoke again he could barely suppress a yodel of irritation." (Ian McEwan, *The Innocent*, 1990) • *Dept of Logic, Pure*: "After all, Roamers had disproved the impossible time and again." *Applied*: "In the vacuum of space no one could see beautiful lines or shiny hulls anyway." (both Kevin J. Anderson, *Hidden Empire*, 2002)

The Absence of God

Ted Chiang interviewed by Jeremy Smith

All science fiction is fundamentally post-religious literature. For those whose minds are shaped by science and technology, the universe is knowable. Faith dissolves, replaced by a sense of wonder at the complexity of creation.

This is the perspective explored in Ted Chiang's first collection, *Stories of Your Life and Others* (Tor, 2002). Born in 1967 in Port Jefferson, New York, Chiang has published eight breathtakingly good stories in the past twelve years. He has yet to publish – or even try to write – a novel. Despite his limited number of publications, however, Chiang has exerted a quiet influence in the genre. A five-time Hugo nominee, he has won nearly every major science-fiction award, including the Nebula (twice in 1990 and 1999), John W. Campbell Award (1992), *Asimov's* Reader's Choice Award (1992), and the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award (1999). Most recently, he won the 2001 Sidewise Award for "Seventy-Two Letters," and the *Locus* Award for "Hell is the Absence of God," which has also been nominated for a Hugo this year.

Chiang's primary method is to change underlying natural laws or symbolic systems, creating worlds and situations that are fantastic to us but utterly rational to the characters that must live with them. In the beautiful "Story of Your Life," learning an alien language allows a linguist to experience past, present and future simultaneously, while the mathematician in "Division by Zero" manages to prove that any two numbers are equal to each other and that mathematics itself is inconsistent. In "Tower of Babylon," a group of miners climb until they reach the vault of heaven, hoping to find God on the other side of the carapace of granite that enfolds their world. "Hell is the Absence of God" tells the tale of one Neil Fisk, whose wife is killed in a visitation by the angel Nathanael to a downtown shopping district. In Neil's thoroughly con-



temporary world, God exists beyond a doubt. Angels behave like weather phenomena, the miracle of their appearances tracked, quantified, and reported on the nightly news. *Stories of Your Life and Others* includes all of Chiang's major published fiction, along with an original story, the superb "Liking What You See: A Documentary."

Ted Chiang graduated from Brown University in Rhode Island in 1989 with a degree in Computer Science. Today he freelances as a technical writer in the computer industry, living in the state of Washington with his girlfriend, Marcia Glover. This interview was conducted in July 2002, on the release of *Stories of Your Life* in America. Over the phone, Chiang answered questions thoughtfully and tentatively, often seeming to doubt his words even as he said them. He did not leave any doubt as to his belief in the ideas behind his stories, however. In his own way, he is clearly a partisan of the scientific worldview portrayed in them.

Why don't you publish more stories?
Because I don't get that many ideas for stories. If I had more ideas, I would write them, but unfortunately they only come at long intervals. I'm probably best described as an occasional writer.

And yet you've been very successful, earning awards and recognition. That usually encourages occasional writers to become professional writers.
I don't think I'm far enough along in

my development as a writer to do that. When I've tried to force myself to write more, it hasn't worked. I would have to reach a new level of proficiency to become more prolific. That'd be great if it happened, but as of yet it hasn't.

Has an editor ever approached you about expanding one of your stories into a novel?

An editor? No. Sometimes that's been suggested to me by a friend, but I don't think any of my stories would really work as a novel. There's a saying that you should leave your audience wanting more, and I fear that if I expanded one of my short stories into a novel, I would leave them wanting less.

What do like about using short-form fiction as vehicles for your ideas?

Well, I started out writing short stories for the same reason that most writers do: they're seen as the place to start before you move on to novels. Of course, some writers are natural novelists, so this strategy doesn't work out for them. Everything they write wants to be longer and longer. But so far I've been comfortable working at shorter lengths. I suppose it's because I'm most interested in writing about characters experiencing a moment of comprehension. Sometimes it's a conceptual breakthrough, sometimes it's just a flash of recognition. For that type of story, short fiction is a good fit.

You're considered by some readers and critics to be one of the genre's best short-form writers. Are there other short-story writers whose work you admire? Any you feel are particularly innovative right now, in either form or content, or both?

I admire Greg Egan's work a great deal. In each story he examines a question very deeply, exploring all its implications. He's especially good at dramatizing the implications of the materialist view of consciousness.

Obviously a lot of his work deals with that. But even with other theoretical questions, he can be very ingenious in coming up with real-life consequences. For example, in his story "Luminous," I thought it was great how he had characters fleeing for their lives as a result of an inconsistency in arithmetic.

I also really admire Karen Joy Fowler's work. Her stories are very wise, and sly, and poignant. I have no idea how she does what she does. Another writer I like is George Saunders, some of whose work would be considered science fiction if it weren't published in magazines like *The New Yorker*. He writes bitterly humorous stories, describing the lives of miserable people in a way that's both funny and sympathetic.

Which writers have most influenced your own writing?

When I was younger, I imprinted on Asimov and Clarke. Those were the writers whom I really enjoyed when I was 12, 13, 14. When I was in college I discovered Gene Wolfe and John Crowley. Both of them made a big impression on me. I can't say that my work is anything like theirs – I wish it were – but previously my sense of wonder in reading science fiction had primarily come from the ideas described. With their work, I also felt wonder at their skill in writing, in constructing and telling their stories.

A lot of your stories demonstrate a deep knowledge of mathematics and linguistics, especially "Story of Your Life" and "Division by Zero." In preparing for this interview, I came across websites for academics whose writers were thrilled that you accurately described their disciplines as well as the inner and outer lives of linguists and mathematicians.

It's nice to know that I didn't make them roll their eyes, because I'm neither a mathematician nor a linguist. My degree is in computer science, and I took some classes in other subject areas when I was in college, but that's the extent my training in these fields. What knowledge I have in linguistics is mostly acquired on my own. I knew really very little about it before I started doing research for "Story of Your Life."

In the author's notes to "Story of Your Life," you mention Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five. Was that novel a direct inspiration, or did you notice the similarity later, after using variational principles in physics to write the story? Both stories use this idea of being "unstuck in time" as a way of expressing a deep fatalism, a sadness about the inevitability of loss.

I actually hadn't read Vonnegut's novel at the time I wrote my story. To

me there's a big difference in the two works. I think of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as being really bleak in its outlook, while I don't think of my story that way at all. My story ends on a note that, to me, is ultimately life-affirming. The story is about choosing to go ahead with life, even though there will be pain in the future as well as joy. You can say that the narrator doesn't actually have a choice, and that's true, but that's not the most important aspect of it. She's not being forced into it against her will. She's accepting the bad with the good.

In stories like "Division by Zero" and "Story of Your Life," you describe these very rational, materialist characters who transcend what they thought were unalterable physical laws, which disorders their perceptions of time and space. One character even attempts suicide. So they achieve this kind of transcendence, but then don't know what to do with it. They are forced to confront themselves. I read these stories as being about science confronting the problems transcendence poses to an empirical, materialist worldview.

That's an interesting perspective. I hadn't really thought of either "Division by Zero" or "Story of Your Life" as dealing with transcendence. For me, those stories are primarily attempts to use mathematics and science as metaphors to illuminate certain aspects of human experience. The characters in those stories internalize their discoveries, in a sense, because they are deeply engaged in their work. What they learn becomes a part of them in a more profound way than with most people just learning something. But I hadn't really thought about transcendence in those stories.

In addition to using symbolic systems to achieve certain emotional effects, you also create alternative universes by altering underlying physical laws, which are fantastic to us but rational to the characters that must live in them, as in "Seventy-Two Letters," "Tower of Babylon," and "Hell is the Absence of God."

Well, I'd put "Tower of Babylon" and "Seventy-Two Letters" in one category, and "Hell is the Absence of God" in another. Those first two stories are more science-fictional, while "Hell is the Absence of God" is straight fantasy. Those first two stories are based on certain out-of-date ideas about the natural world, but they're science-fictional because the characters in them follow a scientific worldview. Whereas the universe in "Hell is the Absence of God" is not based on a discarded scientific worldview. It was never scientific, and it hasn't been discarded. It's a view of the world that many people

have now, except that things are explicit rather than hidden. A lot of people, right now, believe that good and bad fortune are the result of supernatural intervention, and it's often based on what you deserve. In the story this intervention is very obvious, but I don't think that by itself changes a religious universe into a scientific one. Does that make sense?

It makes sense, although the characters in "Hell is the Absence of God" still share a worldview shaped by scientific materialism, despite the presence of angels in their daily lives. They approach the appearance of angels like weather phenomena – it gets reported on the news, and they observe it, and compile statistics, and through observation try to predict the patterns of their appearances. It all seems very rational. Let me talk a bit about how I view the difference between science fiction and fantasy, and more specifically, the difference between science and magic. John Crowley gave a talk in which he talked about the Romanian scholar Ioan Couliano, a scholar of Renaissance history. Couliano said that real magic is inter-subjective, meaning that real magic is the influence of one consciousness on another. For example, when one person casts a spell on another person, to make that person do their bidding. This was at the heart of a lot of Renaissance magic. What this clarified for me was the role of consciousness in magic, as opposed to science and technology. Because in the scientific method, the experimenter's consciousness has no place. It doesn't depend on the scientist having the right intentions, or being pure of heart, or concentrating hard enough, which are very common aspects of magic. And one of the criteria of a scientific result is reproducibility, that it should work no matter who does it, whereas magic is almost exactly the opposite. Magic is highly dependent on the practitioner. Now, in "Seventy-Two Letters" and "Tower of Babylon," the universe behaves in mechanistic manner, so the consciousness of the practitioner – of the scientist – is not involved. No one's moral worth has any effect.

In "Hell is the Absence of God," one's moral worth is definitely a factor. Specifically, there's a relationship between the individual consciousness and some other consciousness – that being God. And that again is characteristic of fantasy, that there are forces which you treat as conscious entities, which you have to appease or make sacrifices to. You have to interact with them as though they were a person, and they respond to you as a person. Which is not how science in our world works at all. Which is why I classify that story as a fantasy rather than as sf.

Why are you attracted to using these mystical and religious frameworks? "Tower of Babylon" recalls St Augustine's description of God as "a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere," and the Renaissance conception of the Rotundum, a spherical container that encompasses Earth, cosmos, soul. This is a very Platonic worldview, one that you seem to comment on from an Aristotelian standpoint. Despite the differences you describe, "Hell is the Absence of God" also uses a religious framework. What makes you want to take this scientific materialist approach to reality and then place it in these contexts?

Well, again, I see them as being different. "Tower of Babylon" is more science-fictional and "Hell is the Absence of God" is more fantasy. There does seem to be a religious component in "Tower of Babylon" and in a less conspicuous manner, in "Seventy-Two Letters." The questions those characters are investigating are issues like the shape of the universe, or cosmology, and the origins of life, and both of these are legitimate questions for scientific inquiry, but they're also questions which have been investigated by religion. So, there is that coincidence there, in that they are touching on the same questions that religion tries to answer, but the characters are behaving more as scientific investigators. Whereas in "Hell is the Absence of God," there really isn't a scientific question being investigated. The issues are more purely the domain of religion – specifically, what is our purpose in life, what kind of life are we supposed to lead, how do we get to heaven? Which are not really questions for scientific inquiry.

Do you consciously use this method – of situating scientific problems in a seemingly fantastic context – to generate a sense of wonder in the reader? I would certainly like to generate a sense of wonder in the reader, but I don't know any reliable way of doing so. I simply write about what interests me, and one of the things that interests me is early ideas about the natural world. It's easy to ridicule them in hindsight, but some of them are non-trivial to disprove. For example, preformation, the idea that there's a fully formed, tiny fetus inside each sperm cell. Without powerful microscopy, it's actually quite difficult to find an observation disproving that theory. And so you can pursue the implications of that for a while, you can imagine a universe in which it's true.

In "Tower of Babylon," you actually ignore the shift away from the unitary, divine language that humankind sup-

posedly spoke prior to the fall of the tower of Babel, to a multiplicity of languages. This is what usually defines the fable in most people's minds. Why did you consciously exclude that, especially given the interest in linguistics that we see in "Story of Your Life"? Is a commentary on language still there, deeply coded?

No, there is nothing in the story about that. There are a number of reasons. One is that it would constitute unambiguous evidence of divine intervention. There'd be no possible natural explanation for a bunch of languages spontaneously appearing. I wanted my story to be set in a world in which one could imagine a purely mechanistic explanation for everything. So, that's one very practical reason.

Speaking more broadly, more fundamentally, this story is not about that issue. In the original fable, the creation of the multitude of languages was specifically an act of God to place an obstacle in front of the builders. It's a punishment for defying God. My story is more about cosmology than mankind's defiance of God. It's more of an sf story because it's about people trying to discover the nature of their world. The moral aspects were not the focus.

You do something similar in "Seventy-Two Letters," where you take the legend of the golem, and then cut it off from the divine and turn it into a technology that anyone can use.

Yes, and that ties into what I was saying about the difference between science and magic. In the folklore version of the golem legend, bringing a clay statue to life is pretty easy, almost anyone can do it. My initial thought was that, from a very practical standpoint, if this actually worked, the implications would be enormous. Contrast this with the original rabbinical stories,

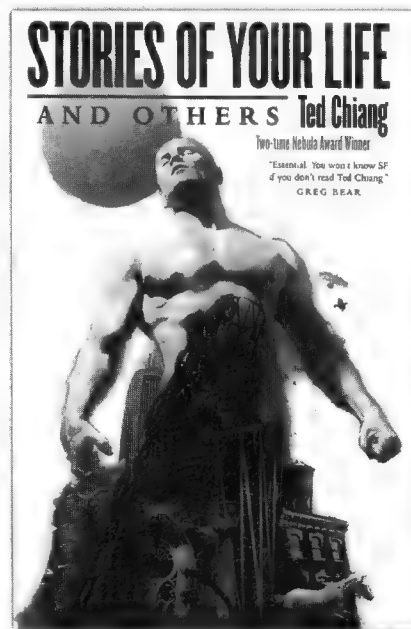
where it's very difficult to create a golem. It requires a very holy rabbi, someone who has studied for years to focus his mind. That type of golem creation is definitely magical because it is very dependent on the creator, and there are a lot of requirements regarding that person's consciousness. It's a very esoteric procedure, and not something that will ever be widely performed. But the folklore version is much more egalitarian. It could conceivably be adapted to mass production, and that makes it less like magic and more like technology.

In "Seventy Two Letters," both the working class and the aristocracy try to manipulate new technology in order to preserve their position in the economy. It's always seemed to me that writing about these topics is one of science fiction's essential tasks, to help formulate cultural responses to the dislocation brought about by technological change. "Scanners Live in Vain," by Cordwainer Smith is one of the classic examples.

It's certainly a classic form of science fiction. And of course, it's behind one of the most common idea-generating strategies for sf writers: given a particular technological advance, figure out who would be hurt by it. This point fits in with what I was saying about the egalitarian quality of technology. When a once-expensive item can be mass-produced, the social and economic consequences can be enormous. And "Seventy-Two Letters" also deals with reproductive technology, which has always raised issues about class, because one group inevitably has more control than another, whether it's men vs. women, or rich vs. poor. And of course eugenics consistently turns out to be rich vs. poor.

In "Liking What You See: A Documentary," a cheap and readily available technology called callignosis neutralizes aesthetic reaction to human appearance. The story describes the debate around making callignosis obligatory on one college campus, mimicking contemporary debates about sexual and racial behavioral codes. How did "Liking What You See" come about? Does that story represent a kind of wish-fulfilment? Wish-fulfilment? Why do you say that?

A great deal of popular sf – Star Trek, for example – depends very heavily upon wish-fulfilment for its appeal. You're on the starship Enterprise, and you've always got a mission that gives meaning to your life, you can teleport anywhere instantaneously, and you can get any food fully prepared from the replicator any time. In the more literary tradition of sf, a lot of stories try to imagine what would happen if peo-



ple got what they wished for, through technology. What complications would ensue? "Liking What You See" begins with the wish to live in a world where looks don't matter, that we can transcend this limitation in our social interactions by just tweaking a neuron. Okay, I see what you mean. You're saying that the wish-fulfilment aspect is that looks don't matter. That's not how most people react to the story. The initial responses I get have mostly been, "Why on Earth would anyone want that?" That's the reaction that I'm accustomed to.

And yet, in our culture, for example in the movie *Shallow Hal*, you see a lot of fantasies where people realize that what matters is what's inside. You see this a lot in *Star Trek*, too, now that I think about it. It's a view that's very aggressively promoted, especially to children, although nobody actually adheres to it.

It's also the message of the movie *Shrek*. The problem is that there are two perspectives involved in the question of appearances: the person being perceived, and the person doing the perceiving. From the point of view of being perceived, that's where you encounter the wish that looks don't matter. That's where it's most relevant, because we're judged by our appearances and we wish we weren't.

A lot of people have very deep wounds as a result of feeling judged by their appearance.

Yes, definitely. And then there's the other perspective, that of being the perceiver. It's from that point of view, I think, that most people ask me, "why would anyone want calliagnosia?" Because everyone likes looking at a pretty face. Perhaps it's just a statistical fluke that most of the reactions I've gotten have been from the perceiver point of view. But that's why I was surprised to hear you describe the story as wish-fulfilment. You're the first, I think.

There's a dualism there that's hard for most people to reconcile. Each of us is simultaneously perceiver and perceived, so we have to accept that both views have validity.

There's definitely a tension there. We'd like not to be judged on our appearances, but we all like looking at a pretty face. In a sense, we'd like everyone else to adopt the technology except for us. You previously asked about what prompted that story. It was probably more from the perceiver's point of view that the idea came to me. I was wondering why my eye is drawn towards certain people. What if we could eliminate that? In modern society, certainly in our

media-saturated culture, beauty is used as a tool to get our attention. It's working on us as perceivers, but not necessarily in a way that's helpful.

Beauty is also used to oppress women, as a group. There's a body of feminist thought that describes beauty as a mechanism of control. This social structure has evolved over time to achieve certain effects, and one of them is to keep women in a permanent state of insecurity. Individual men might not like it, but overall they still benefit from it. Did that analysis factor into "Liking What You See" at all? Could this technology, like the Pill or abortion or automation, contribute to freeing women from social mores that evolved under agricultural societies and religious modes of thought? It definitely has that potential, the possibility of freeing women from trying to meet an impossible standard of beauty. On the other hand, in some circles it's accepted as given that beauty is an outmoded social construct, something that we, as enlightened individuals, can do without. But while that sounds great in theory, it's harder to do in practice. One of the things I find disquieting about our preference for beauty is that it appears very deeply ingrained. And when your political ideology is in conflict with your innate reactions, you've got a problem. When I was doing research for the story, I came across a quote that said, "Allowing beautiful women their beauty may turn out to be one of the most difficult aspects of personal liberation." I thought that was a very good point.

As a writer, you're not very political at all. "Liking What You See" is one of your few stories to describe a political conflict, or that submits itself to a political reading. There's also something implicit there that is never fully explored, which is that racism loses its power when you stop judging people by appearances.

It's true that racism is in some ways a matter of judging people by their appearance. But the specific type of agnosia that I posit in the story would not actually affect racism, because it doesn't make one blind to skin colour. And there are a lot of other factors that go into racism, like economic factors, cultural factors, the basic human tendency to group people into "us" and "them." It's not just a matter of appearances.

Do you deal with this explicitly in the story? I don't recall.

At one point, the neurologist character talks about an attempt to create a kind of race blindness, or race agnosia, by trying to disable certain

types of perception and category discrimination in the brain. And he says that it wasn't successful. While I agree that race blindness is an interesting idea, I didn't think there was any way to make it even remotely plausible in neurological terms. Because there are just too many things that go into racism. It seems to me that to eliminate the perception of race at a neurological level, you'd have to rewrite the underpinnings of our social behaviour.

In your author's notes in the back of the book, you say that if this process were to exist, you would give it a try. So obviously there's a part of you that sees this as desirable, this kind of transcendence. Would it be desirable to eliminate race as a category? Would we even want to transcend race, through whatever means?

That's a tough question. Perception of race doesn't provide the pleasure that beauty does, so there'd be no objection from the perceiver's point of view. The objection would be from the perceived's point of view, because for many people their race is closely tied to their sense of identity, and they wouldn't want to sacrifice any part of that. So can you retain recognition of race while entirely eliminating prejudice based on race? I don't know. On the other hand, I think I could more easily imagine, in a narrow theoretical context, a society in which racism didn't exist, than one in which there was no preference for beauty. For example, imagine a world in which beautiful faces of every ethnicity can be used to sell magazines. Now imagine a world in which plain faces, everyday ordinary people, can be used to sell magazines. I tend to think the former is more plausible.

"Liking What You See" also strikes me as an excellent example of merging of form with content. Why did you choose a documentary format to tell the story? The documentary format made it easy to include a lot of different perspectives in less space than a traditional narrative. While the story does keep returning to one character throughout, it's more an examination of the issue itself rather than an account of one person's experience. What I had in mind as a model was a film by Henry Jaglon called *Eating*, about women's relationship with food. It wasn't technically a documentary, but most of it was a series of interviews rather than narrative. I thought it was fascinating.

What's next for you? What new projects do you have gestating?

I might do the choreography for *Teletubbies on Ice*, or I might write another story. I haven't decided yet.

A Place Where Nothing Ever Happens

Claude Lalumière

The first time Kyle received one of those phone calls, he was getting ready for a date.

Kyle had been attracted to Lauren since the first time he'd seen her, when she walked into Pen & Paper and asked to see the manager. She was there for a job interview. He remembered struggling not to let his mouth gape open. He remembered actually being able to direct her to Mr Howard without sounding like a monosyllabic moron.

And he'd made her giggle. He didn't know how he'd done it. But he could tell by the glint in her eyes that it was a good giggle.

He'd always sneered at people – women, mostly – who went on and on about eyes and eye colour. Blue-eyed, brown-eyed, fucking fuchsia-eyed. What did he care? He never believed that it made one iota of difference to how attractive someone was. Besides, he could never remember anyone's eye colour. Once, a girl he been seeing for almost two years – Jessica – dumped him because he couldn't remember what colour her eyes were. What kind of stupid reason was that for breaking up with someone? He still had no idea what colour her eyes were.

But Lauren's eyes were a bright brown that verged on orange. At work, he was almost afraid of catching a glimpse of them. Often, when he did, he lost track of what he was doing and where he was. Her eyes made him dream of a peaceful nowhere, suffused with a bright warm glow. More than once, he'd had to be shaken out of it by Cass, the assistant manager, who, thankfully, was more amused than annoyed. You should just ask her out, Kyle. Get it over with already!, she'd tell him.

It had taken him a few months to get up the nerve to even contemplate asking her out. First, she was just too gorgeous not to have some type of boyfriend or something in her life. Second, she was a co-worker; if she turned him

down, it would make things awkward.

He'd had to take a few days off work to attend his uncle's funeral. His mom's brother Flip – his real name was Philip, but everyone called him Flip – had been the coolest guy in the family, next to Kyle's long-dead dad. Before Kyle's dad died, the three of them – Dad, Kyle, and Flip – hung out together all the time: went to movies together, shot some basketball, walked around the city. After, Flip was always there for Kyle, reminding him that life continued. That you had to keep having fun. So they still did all the stuff they had loved to do with Kyle's dad. But eventually Uncle Flip had to move out of the country because of his work, and it was just Kyle and his mom after that. Kyle hadn't seen Uncle Flip for almost three years when he died.

When Kyle came back to the shop, he learned that he'd pulled inventory duty. Together with Lauren. Alone with Lauren. That Sunday, the shop was closed, and they had the place to themselves. No customers, no bosses, no co-workers. If Kyle was ever going to ask Lauren out, this would be the time. Besides, in the three months Lauren had been working at Pen & Paper, Kyle had never heard her mention the dreaded boyfriend word. There might be some hope after all. And as Uncle Flip would have said: life goes on. You have to keep doing the fun things in life, no matter what.

They were taking a break – they'd just finished doing all the behind-the-counter stock and were next going to attack the showcase islands in the middle of the retail floor – and Kyle decided that he was going to pop the question there and then. Somehow the words just wouldn't come out, though.

They were talking about what they really wanted to do instead of working in a stationery shop. At least, Lauren

was. She was spending every evening writing, either film criticism or film scripts. She told him about the screenplay she was working on, a period piece set in the States during the Second World War, a hardboiled crime story starring a female private eye, while so many men were away fighting. She told Kyle how she always emailed everything she wrote to her brother Jordan, who never let her give up on her writing. She made some money placing a few articles in magazines, in journals, and on websites, but it wasn't enough. She still hadn't sold any of her screenplays. She'd taken this job to help pay the rent until her career picked up. Plus, it was too easy to spend her whole life in front of the computer writing. She liked interacting with people every day. Faced with Lauren's determination and ideas, Kyle felt increasingly inadequate.

Eventually Lauren rescued the moment and said, "Hey, they're showing the first cut of *The Big Sleep* at the rep on Wednesday. The one that was never released at the time. Wanna go? I love Bacall so much. And this is one of my favourite movies. I've seen it, like, 20 times or something. But I've never seen this version." She explained that studio executives had been unhappy with the first version of the film. It had sat unreleased for a year, until new footage was shot to emphasize the Bogart/Bacall chemistry, but, according to what she'd read, at the expense of the plot.

"So?" Lauren asked.

Kyle realized that he still hadn't answered. "Yeah," he said, "I'd love to go." Lauren's almost-orange eyes lit up, and Kyle felt his insides melt into hot marshmallow goo.

It was that Wednesday at 6.30 pm, while Kyle was shaving, that the phone rang. There was a horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach that it was Lauren calling. Cancelling.

He picked up the phone, half his face covered with shaving cream and, miraculously, not a cut on him yet. Trying not to sound dejected, he said, "Hello?"

"Hi, son," answered the impossible voice, "I know this must come as a shock, but I need to talk to you."

Kyle's mind raced through a whole spectrum of emotions and reactions. There was a long silence. Tentatively, the voice on the phone said, "Kyle?"

And then Kyle simply got furious, mad as all hell. "You sick asshole! I don't who you the fuck you are, but if you ever try this stunt again, I'll find you and wring your putrid neck." Kyle slammed the phone down.

Why the hell would someone call him impersonating his dead dad? How twisted was that?

Then his rage turned into tears, and the doorbell rang. He stomped to the door.

He opened the door to his apartment, an angry scowl on his face, tears still wet around his eyes, globs of shaving cream dripping from his cheeks onto his naked chest, onto his black cotton pants, onto the floor. "What do you want!"

And there stood Lauren, holding out a bouquet of flowers for him.

And she was gorgeous. Just gorgeous. She was wearing a blue jean jacket over a one-piece pastel-coloured

flowery dress that stopped mid-thigh. A simple black hoop hung on her left ankle, and her toenails – peeking out of her sandals – were painted a dark orange. The dress was low-cut, revealing the curve of her breasts, and Kyle had a vision of his face pressed close to them. He breathed deeply and imagined savouring their aroma. No make-up to mar her delicate lips, bright eyes, and freckled cheeks. Her neck-length, strawberry-blonde hair tucked behind her right ear with a purple and orange flower, which emphasized her entrancing eyes...

The next thing Kyle knew, he was sitting on the couch. Kyle felt something wet sliming on his chest, and he realized that most of the shaving cream had slid off his face. His deep embarrassment and conviction that he'd forever screwed up his chances to ever, ever hook up with Lauren prevented him from appreciating the touch of Lauren's hands, which were gently cupping his left hand.

Before either of them had time to say anything, the phone rang again. When, after a few rings, Kyle didn't move, Lauren let go of his hand and answered it. "Hold on a minute," she said. "I'll see if he's available." She held her palm tightly over the receiver and pointed the phone towards Kyle. "It's for you. Should I just take a message?"

Automatically, Kyle grabbed the phone and said, "Hello?"

It was that voice again. "Is that your girlfriend? She sounds nice. What's her name?"

Kyle dropped the phone on the floor, let a long, loud, angry howl, and started crying again. This should have been a perfect evening, and it had turned into hell.

Lauren picked up the phone. Kyle was too wrapped up in his own misery to hear what she was saying.

Later – a few minutes? an hour? Kyle had lost track of time as well as hope – his face and chest were being softly wiped clean by a warm, moist towel. Kyle refocused, brought his senses to bear on his immediate surroundings.

He was still sitting on the couch. From the light coming through the window, he estimated that it was still early evening. Not much time had elapsed, then. Lauren had taken off her jacket. Her shoulders looked so soft. She was washing him. Could he feel more pathetic?

She looked up at him – she must have sensed a shift in his posture – and it took all of his will power for him not to segue into the never-never land her eyes usually sent him off to.

"Look, Lauren, I– I, huh, I'm sorry about all this. My Uncle Flip died last week, and then the phone– I mean, this isn't– I'm not– Fuck. I–"

She said, "Shh," tracing his lips with her finger. Facing him, she sat on his thighs. She slipped the straps off her shoulders and pulled down her dress. She put his hand on her breast and kissed him, tentatively.

Feeling stupid as the words left his mouth, Kyle said, "But what about the movie? It's only playing tonight."

She kissed him again, shutting him up.

Kyle didn't believe it. "You're telling me that everyone knows this? How come I don't? It doesn't make any sense."

Kyle and Lauren were sitting in a booth at The Small Easy, an all-night café that, it turned out, they both knew and really liked. The lighting was intimate, but not too dark. There was a candle burning at their table. A big cactus-like plant further enhanced the feeling of privacy by isolating the booth from the rest of the cramped café. Not that it really mattered then, anyway. At 4 am, there were only two other customers, neither of whom paid them any attention: an immobile grey-haired man staring out the window, his cell phone lying on the table and his hand resting on a full cup of tea that looked like it had been cold for a long time, and a teenage Asian girl, with more rings on her face than Kyle could count, scribbling furiously in a notebook between gulps of steaming coffee from a jumbo mug.

"But it's true. I've been talking to both my grannies almost every day since it started last week." Lauren took a bite out of her tomato sandwich.

"Okay, so how come this stuff isn't on all the talk shows? Why aren't there TV specials about it? If what you're saying is true it would be on the news, in the papers, and all that. There's no way I wouldn't know. People would be talking about it. All the time." Kyle dipped a thick French fry into The Small Easy's extra-spicy mustard-and-mayo sauce and waved it at Lauren to emphasize his point.

They'd had sex for nearly seven hours. At first, slowly, tentatively, shyly. Then faster, almost violently, flipping impatiently between every position and permutation, trying to experience every sensation the union of their bodies could produce. Then almost in slow motion, taking the time to appreciate the lingering sensations of every touch, kiss, bite, friction. All this without a single word spoken, until, reacting to a loud stomach rumbling, Lauren said, "I'm so hungry!" Another stomach rumbled – perhaps the same one? Kyle wasn't sure whose stomach had made the noise either time. "Yeah, me too," he said. They looked at each other and laughed.

They'd ordered together, sharing a giant bowl of fries, three sandwiches, a salad, and The Small Easy pickle platter – an ever-changing selection of marinated vegetables prepared by the chef.

"It was on *Oprah* a couple of days ago," Lauren said, crunching on a carrot stick from the salad.

"Holy shit. Am I ever out of it."

"Actually, I just made that up."

"What?"

"I mean, it could've been on *Oprah*. I wouldn't know. I never watch those shows."

Kyle was getting annoyed, now. "Don't lie to me! None of this shit is true! You're making all of this up!" In fact, he was getting angry, his voice getting louder.

"No, no. I was making a point. You don't watch those shows either, right? So how would you know? I mean, I think it's one of those things everyone knows, but nobody talks about."

"What do you mean! What things? What do you have to do with this shit? Are you in on it with the guy who called me? Is this a big joke for you? Making fun of me like this?" Kyle was shouting now. The grey-haired man was still

looking out the window, ignoring them, but the Asian girl, the waiter, and the cook were all staring at them.

Kyle looked at Lauren, looked directly into her eyes. They still had a powerful effect on him, as if his insides were being realigned or something. "Why are you lying to me? I thought–"

"That really was your dad, Kyle. He's dead, and he misses you."

"I have to get out of here." He got up and took some money out of his pocket. "Here, this should cover my half."

As Kyle left the café, all he could think about was that he'd just had the best sex of his life and that Lauren was the most gorgeous girl in the world. And that he was walking out on all that. Walking out on Lauren.

Kyle's mother sounded worried. "Are you sure you're all right? It's not like you to call like this. Not that I mind. You should call more often. I almost forget I have a son."

That again. Every time Kyle called her, his mother reminded him that he should call more often. And she wondered why he didn't.

"Well, I've got a strange question for you. Hum. Huh."

"Well, what is it? I'll be glad to help if I can. What do you need?"

"No, Mom, it's not that. Well. Hum. Have you been getting, like, weird phone calls lately?"

"What do you mean weird phone calls? Perverts? Pranks? No, I haven't."

"No, not really. That's not what I mean."

"Well, I can't guess what you mean, Kyle."

"Like, someone pretending to be someone else?"

"I'm not sure what– Oh! Wait a minute! There was this man the other day..."

"Yes?" Damn! Whoever this was had been bothering his mother, too.

"Well, this man, he said he was taking a survey, but, really, he was trying to sell me insurance."

"Oh. Nothing else?"

"Kyle, just what is going on?"

"Nothing, Mom, I'm just tired, okay. I– huh. Look. This may sound weird, but when's the last time you spoke to Dad?"

"That's okay, I know you miss him. You were always closer to him than you were to me. I know you were. Don't deny it. The last time I spoke with him was at the hospital. He was on so much medication; I don't think he even knew where he was. He was mumbling something about your Uncle Flip. And then he went to sleep. When I got home, the hospital called to say that he'd died."

Kyle had heard all this before. Even after eight years, it still hurt. He didn't want to cry with his mom on the phone.

"Thanks, Mom. Anyway, I should get off the phone. I'll be late for work."

"I love you, Kyle. Don't work too hard. Maybe you should take a vacation. I could give you money for a trip. Are you eating enough? You should go back to school. You could get a better job then, you know. You should get a girlfriend. You–"

"Mom. I gotta go. Love you. Bye."

After he hung up, his phone flashed to indicate there were some messages. He checked: five hang-ups. He was pretty sure what those were. That psycho again.

Kyle wasn't surprised that his mom had desperately squeezed in most of her usual litany at the end of their conversation. Not for nothing had Kyle moved to another city. After his dad died – when Kyle was 15 – his mom had tried to compensate for their mutual loss by micro-managing Kyle's life. She meant well, but he had ended up not knowing what he wanted, with his life, his education, or anything. Faced with the seemingly limitless options of school, he had chosen to drop out and move out on his own; maybe that way he'd eventually sort out what his own ideas were. It didn't work. He was 23, and he still had no clue.

He sighed, because he was exhausted and because he was dreading going to work. Lauren was going to be there. He'd feared things would turn out awkward. He should never have asked her out. He should have let her stay a pleasant fantasy. Someone to masturbate to before going to sleep.

But, he corrected himself, she had asked him out, not the other way around. She had brought him flowers. She had sat on his lap, taken her clothes off, kissed him.

As usual, he didn't know what to think, what to feel.

Half an hour after he got to work, the sky suddenly darkened and rain started coming down like divine wrath. And kept on going all day. Business was dead, and Kyle spent a lot of time dusting shelves, pointedly avoiding Lauren. Despite himself, he couldn't help looking at her whenever he thought she wouldn't notice. He should just confront her and ask her what the hell all that phone business was really about. And then tell her to fuck off, get another job, get out of his life, and just stop being so sexy in front of him all the time.

Or maybe he should just quit. Get away. Travel. Like his mom had said.

Then again, he could just sulk and ignore everything until it went away. Unplug his phone for a while and not pay attention to everything inside himself that was screaming to him to be with Lauren.

There hadn't been anyone in the store for hours. He saw Lauren talking to Cass, in hushed tones so he couldn't hear. Then Lauren came straight at him.

"Let's go," she said.

"Huh? Where? I mean, I don't have anything to say to you."

"Stop being stupid." She grabbed his hand and walked him towards the door.

"What are you doing? My shift doesn't end for another two hours."

"It's okay, I cleared it with Cass. It's so quiet. She can handle the store by herself."

Kyle took his hand back. "We can't go out there. Look at that rain."

"So we'll get wet."

The sex was even better the second time. She teased him and teased him until it felt as though his cock would

burst. Then she slid on him at just the right moment, and he had the longest orgasm ever. When she came on top of him, she cooed in the sexiest way, squirming sinuously, her whole body exuding heaven.

Fuck, Kyle thought, I don't care about that phone shit any more.

They'd come in from the rain soaking wet. One look at each other, and they exploded in laughter so hard their stomachs cramped; they could hardly breathe.

Kyle didn't remember who started taking whose clothes off first, but in no time they were naked and fucking their way to Kyle's bedroom.

Afterwards, they lay in bed not talking, sometimes grunting, sometimes nibbling, sometimes sniffing each other's skin, sometimes slowly – almost absent-mindedly – rubbing against each other, until Lauren said, "Okay, we have to talk. About your dad. And I don't care how funny you are, or how good the sex is, you better not walk out on me this time. Or we're through."

"But this is my bed. My apartment." And he thought, I'm funny? Cool. No one's ever told me that before.

"Pretty clever of me, eh?"

In the end, she had just given him a number. His dad's phone number, she claimed. He'd given it to her that time she'd answered the phone for Kyle. Call him, she'd said, let him tell you. And then call me. Call me. And he could hear in her voice: I know you're hurting, but don't fuck this up between us.

After she left, he stared at the number. The area code was 666. What the hell? And what was with the 13-digit extension?

And then he thought: Why am I believing any of this?

Because the world's greatest girl thought he was funny and liked to fuck him, fuck him better than anyone else ever had.

He picked up the phone: a dozen more hang-ups in his voicemail. Shit. He put the phone back down again.

And then he thought: every time I don't decide something I end up feeling like I made a decision anyway. The wrong one. Always the wrong one. How had he ever had the guts to move away from his mom? A rare moment, that.

"Well," Kyle said out loud, "here's another rare moment."

And he punched the weird number on his phone. He got the familiar: "If you know the extension number of your party please enter it now." But it continued, in a snarky: "If you don't, hang up now and stop wasting everyone's time."

Kyle punched in the 13-digit extension. It was then that he noticed that it included both the year his father was born and the year he died.

He got his dad's voicemail.

Kyle's father had been his best friend. When he died the world got darker, almost too dark for Kyle to handle. If it hadn't been for Uncle Flip, Kyle might not have been able to cope.

Kyle and his dad watched the same stupid TV shows

together, went out to the movies at least once a week, shopped for CDs, played card games and board games every night (Kyle's mom could never understand why they liked that so much), took bike rides, went camping – they did everything together, they were the best of pals. Unlike his friends with their parents, Kyle had never been embarrassed by his dad. Dad was the greatest. Unqualified.

Kyle hadn't left a message, but his dad – or, rather, the voice claiming to be his dad – called back in less than five minutes. "There's all kinds of fancy features on this phone, you know. Call display and all that. Even email and internet. Haven't figured out how to use those yet, though. You know I was never into all that computer stuff. But, hey, I've got lots of time now."

Could Kyle let himself believe that was really his dad on the phone? Why would anyone go to the trouble of playing such a cruel prank on him?

"Listen, Da– I mean, how can it be you? How do I know this is really you?" Kyle was still precariously perched on a seesaw of rage and tears, but managed to keep it internal. He had to see this through, one way or another.

"I know this is hard, son. I hate to hurt you or upset you. But this can be a good thing. We can be pals again, right? Ask me something. Anything. It's me. Really me."

It sounded so much like him: "No. I don't know. You tell me something."

"Well... While I think about that, I want to say that's one hell of nice girlfriend you've got there. She told me to wait before calling you again, that she'd ease you into the idea. Meanwhile, she even called me a few times to keep me company until you were ready. A real sweetheart, she is. Hang on to her."

Kyle felt himself blush, remembering the two times he'd had sex with Lauren. "Yeah, she's great."

"Good. She likes you a lot, you know. When you find someone you love you shouldn't let them slip away. You shouldn't..." Kyle's dad trailed off. There was a long silence.

"Dad? Are you still there?"

"Yeah. Sorry about that. Anyway, I think I remembered something, something to prove to you who I am. The summer you were 14, at least once a week we played Risk in the basement, through the whole night, creeping back to bed just as the sun started to come up. Your mother would always still be asleep when I slipped in next to her. She never found out."

"That was the summer before you died." It was getting harder for Kyle to stifle his tears.

"Oh... and remember that week-long bike trip in the country when you were twelve? The first night, when we pitched camp, a fox cub wandered into our tent, and we fed it some cheese."

"It's really you, isn't it?"

They reminisced for hours. And then Kyle started asking questions. Lauren had told him some of it the other night at The Small Easy, but he had assumed it was all lies, and he hadn't really pieced it together then, or even fully paid attention.

Kyle's dad explained what he could. "A few weeks ago, Lucifer cut some kind of deal with a cell-phone company – don't ask me the details, these demons aren't exactly the chatty type – and got enough phones to distribute to all of the dead. Well, the human dead, anyway. The animals didn't get phones."

Kyle still had trouble with some of this. "So... You're in Hell. You were a great guy. The best father ever. Why are you in Hell? And what are animals doing in Hell? I don't get it."

"Hum.... First off, there's only Hell."

"What do you mean, only Hell?"

"No Heaven, no Purgatory, no Nirvana, no Valhalla, nothing else. Just Hell. All the dead come here. It's not so bad, really. A bit boring, maybe – and certainly understaffed and disorganized – but not so bad."

"So you're burning in Hell. No matter what I do, I'll end up burning in Hell."

"Oh, no. There's no burning."

"Torture?"

"Nope. No torture. It's just this endless sea, only without the water. It's where all the animals end up when they die. Bears, owls, insects, crocodiles, sharks, whales, dinosaurs, people. It's all the same. You die. You end up here."

"There's dinosaurs in Hell? Cool."

"I guess so. They're just part of the scenery, you know."

"So what do you do all day?"

"Not much. For one thing, you never sleep. You can't sleep, in fact. So, mostly, you just hang around. Wander. Talk to people. The dogs are nice. Plus, here they don't shit all over the place. Actually, nobody shits here. Can't say I miss that."

"Well, that doesn't sound too bad."

"I guess not. But the demons shit, though. And fart. Stinko, let me tell ya."

"Maybe it's their diet."

"Could be. I've never seen them eat, though."

"But, all in all, are you all right there?"

"Well, you know, there's never any sunlight. No movies, either. No TV. No sports. No food. Lots of noisy bugs. Plus you're kind of insubstantial. You can't really touch anyone. Almost, but not quite. And it's kinda hard to get motivated or excited about anything. Nothing ever happens here."

"But what about God?"

"I dunno. Haven't seen him. The folk around here don't seem to like to talk about that."

After the conversation with his dad, Kyle found seven more hang-ups. Kyle had assumed that all the recent hang-ups in his voicemail had been from his father. He'd meant to ask him, but, in the excitement of actually talking to his dead father, he'd forgotten. Anyway, this established that the hang-ups were someone else's doing. Who was calling him like that? Couldn't be Lauren; his mysterious caller had rung several times while they'd had sex. Wasn't like his mother not to leave long, guilt-inducing messages. And it's not as if he had friends, or anything. Probably telemarketers, he concluded.

It was 8.50 am. He'd spoken with his dad for more than nine hours. Wow, he thought, Dad.

He called Lauren.

"He's driving me crazy." Kyle said, while absent-mindedly stroking the hood of Lauren's clit. She squirmed and moaned.

"I mean, I love him, and all that. And he really likes you. He likes how you talked to him that night when he first called and I freaked out." His other hand cupped her breast, lightly fingered her nipple. She gasped.

"And, like, I know he's my dad and my best friend, but, geez, he won't leave me alone. He calls me all the time, and he wants to talk for hours. And hours."

They were taking a midnight bath. The bubblebath smelled like oranges. A couple of scented candles flickered on the edge of the sink. Lauren was lying with her back against Kyle's chest. Only a little bit of water had splashed on the floor so far.

"I've been telling him he should call Mom. But he won't. He won't tell me why, either. She asks about him all the time." The phone calls from the dead had become big news. There'd been lots of TV specials and talk shows. Mediums who used to claim they talked to the dead were all exposed as frauds. The Catholic Church declared that the voices were demons working for the Prince of Lies (as it liked to call Lucifer; Kyle's dad had seen him from afar a couple of times and said he seemed like a nice guy). Its position was that the voices were trying to undermine Christ's teachings, by denying Heaven, salvation, and damnation. Religions everywhere were having trouble reconciling their dogma with what the dead were saying. And there were more troubles. There were pressures to retry murder cases in light of information the dead were giving, although not a single case had yet been brought to trial in that way. Scandals erupted in families, governments, and corporations because of information from the dead. The stock market was taking a beating. The media was having a ball, though.

"I keep telling her that I haven't heard from him, to spare her feelings, but I hate to lie." He slid a couple of fingers inside her while pinching her nipple. Lauren cried out, and her legs shot out of the bath, splashing water and bubbles on the floor.

"What am I gonna do? I feel so guilty about it, but I don't think I wanna talk to him any more. At least, not so much. I know he's dead and bored and all that. But, fuck, I've got my own life now." Kyle lifted his hands, emphasizing his frustration.

"Hey," Lauren said. "Put your hands back where they were."

A lot more water splashed on the floor after that. When the phone rang, they ignored it.

While they were towelling themselves off, the phone rang again.

"You should get it," Lauren said. "It might be your mystery caller. One less thing on your mind once you clear that up."

"Nah. It's bound to be either my mom or dad. Guilt or

boredom. My life's great options." With a deep sigh, Kyle answered the phone.

"Kyle! You're a hard guy to get a hold of."

"So I heard from Uncle Flip. Turns out he was the one leaving all those hang-ups. He said he didn't want our first afterlife contact to be a message." There was silence on the end of the line.

"Dad? Are you still there?" More silence.

"Dad?"

Kyle – barely – heard his dad mutter, "Flip..."

"Is everything okay, Dad?"

"Huh... sorry, Kyle. Hmm. Listen. There's something I have to tell you."

After Kyle got off the phone, he ran over to Lauren's. He had so much nervous energy to burn. He didn't bother calling. He just ran.

Wait till she hears this, he thought.

Once he reached Lauren's apartment, he used the boyfriend key she'd given him. The thought that he rated a key made him feel really horny. He stepped inside.

There was an empty cardboard box on the coffee table and some packing material on the floor. Lauren was hooking up a new machine to her TV.

"Look at you! Are you okay?" she said as she looked up at him.

"Huh? Yeah. I ran here. I've got such wild news!"

"Me too. You'll never believe what happened to me today." She finished hooking up the new machine. Kyle noticed what it was. "Hey! You bought a DVD player! Cool!"

Lauren walked up to Kyle, rubbing her face against his chest. "Mmm. You smell real sweaty and sexy, and I want to celebrate." She grabbed his T-shirt and pulled it off. She gave him a mischievous grin and ran her tongue from his navel to his neck.

Kyle grabbed her, pulled her off her feet, and carried her to the couch. "Tell me what happened!" he said, while he removed her panties from under her skirt.

"I got a call from *Flicker*," she rubbed one hand on his stiff crotch while unfastening his belt with the other. "The editor offered me a monthly column at \$2,000, plus features and reviews at 50 cents a word." She reached over and slid a finger up his butt. "I can make a living at this!"

"Babe, that's so great!" He groaned. "Oh yeah, keep doing that."

They stopped talking for while.

Kyle was drowsily nuzzling Lauren's neck. They were lying on the floor, their clothes strewn all over the living room.

She asked him, "So you never told me your news."

"That's right. I guess I'll just come out and say it. My dad is in love with Uncle Flip."

"What! Really?"

"Yeah, he was worried I'd freak out, but I think it's cool, if kinda sad."

"Well, give me more details."

Kyle propped himself up and leaned his back against the couch. "Well, it turns out that Dad has always had the hots for Uncle Flip, but never got the nerve to do any-

thing about it while he was alive. Plus, he didn't want to hurt Mom. And he's pretty sure that Flip felt the same way. Come to think of it, Flip never did marry or have kids or anything, and he hung around with us a whole lot. Plus, he was always real chummy with Dad. Anyway. So I gave him Flip's number, and he's gonna tell him how he feels and try to hook up with him. I'll feel really good if I know I helped them get together after all this time. I mean, it won't be like they were alive," Kyle ran his fingers through Lauren's hair, "but at least they'll be able to keep each other company."

"Kyle, you're a real sweetheart, you know." She kissed him, slowly and deeply.

When she disengaged herself, she got up and took something out of a plastic bag. "Remember when we missed that rare version of *The Big Sleep* at the rep?"

"Yeah." Kyle grinned, looking at her naked body and remembering the first time they'd had sex.

"Well, we can finally see it." She held up the DVD case of *The Big Sleep*. "It's on here. Let's watch it. I've been thinking so much about buying a player, and this DVD especially. But I couldn't really afford it. Now, well... my gifts to myself in honour of my new success!"

She put the disc in the machine, and they cuddled up on the couch. And Kyle – feeling Lauren's naked skin against his, enjoying her toes rubbing against his leg – thought, Fuck, life is good. I don't care if I don't have a career or big goals or anything. I mean, I kinda don't mind my job; plus, being with Lauren is doing something. It's important.

As unexpectedly as the calls from the dead started, they stopped. When people tried calling the dead, they got: "The number you have reached is not in service." The phone calls from Hell had lasted a month. "A lunar month," Lauren told Kyle. "The calls started on a full moon and ended on the next." Kyle didn't know what that was supposed to mean. "I don't know, either," said Lauren, "but it can't be just a coincidence."

Surprisingly quickly, the world recovered. Already the news was filled with stories "proving" that it had been a scam or a practical joke. But Kyle knew better.

He never did find out if his dad and Uncle Flip met up with each other. But they probably did, or will, he thought. Hell's a big place, but they have lots of time.

Lauren and Kyle moved in together into a bigger apartment, one big enough for her to have an office at home. They were getting dinner ready; Lauren's brother Jordan was in town and coming over. Kyle was a bit nervous about meeting him for the first time. He was a really important part of Lauren's life. What if they didn't get along?

Trying to get over his anxiety, Kyle said, "Hey! Get this. There were these two guys—"

Lauren interrupted him. "You know, when I say you're funny, I don't mean that your jokes are funny, so you should stop trying so hard to make jokes."

"Oh." Kyle was confused. Was this some kind of round-about way of breaking up with him? And he thought

things were going so well. Shit.

"It's how you are, who you are, that's so funny. Just relax and be yourself. You amuse me in so many little ways. The look of panic in your face every time someone addresses you. The way you always spit exactly three times after you brush your teeth. How you constantly rub your nose. How you tend to lose yourself inside your own head. How you overreact to everything."

"So it's who I am that's a joke?" Instead of breaking up with him, she'll laugh at him for the rest of their lives? Kyle tried to balance the damage to his ego with the sex and all the other ways she made him feel good.

"No, silly. You're charming! Everything about you is charming! You're so transparent and honest. Real and direct. I love that."

"Oh. All right then." He grinned.

Lauren sat him down, dropped on his lap, squeezed his hand between her thighs, and kissed him.

And Kyle looked into those bright brown, almost-orange eyes of hers and lost himself in the love he saw in there.

Lauren jumped off Kyle's lap when the doorbell rang. Kyle savoured the lingering taste of her lips on his own.

Lauren walked back into the kitchen with her brother in tow, and Kyle looked up into his big, light-brown eyes, so bright they were almost orange. And Kyle thought, Shit, he's really cute.

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Nick Lowe

It's a symptom of Hollywood's alarm at the rising sophistication of its audiences that the summer's top-branded movie enlists Cruise and Spielberg in a film about the predictability of endings. It's as if we've reached a stage in the evolution of film where audiences have become like autistic precogs floating in warm baths of blue jelly, as perfectly attuned to the currents of possibility in summer-movie plotting as chess masters contemplating a board in play. Endings can be accurately foreseen up to two hours off; in *Minority Report* itself, the identity and motivation of the villain are perfectly predictable from the early minutes, notwithstanding a studiously off-hand reference to both by Lois Smith's plot-oracle character in a glaringly unsuccessful attempt at misdirection. So can movie plotting escape from the world it's made? "We really don't get many premeditations any more." Is there any room for surprise in a future so mechanistic?

Philip Dick saw this one coming, of course. Unlike the sources of other Dick films to date, "The Minority Report" is an overlooked work in its canon, boasting a great hook, a meandering middle to delight fans and baffle anyone else's patience, and an insanely convoluted ending that even on the page takes two or three goes to get your head around. Inconveniently for film adaptation, though, this tortuous ending is also the point, since Precrime in Dick's version was simply a jump-start device for a story whose real interest was the exploration of ideas from early systems theory about how multiple computers can work

jointly on a problem, and the mind-bending implications of this model for PKD conspiracy plotting when the story's outcome is computed at the outset and *fed back in*. As a model of how audiences read a Cruise/Spielberg summer chase movie, this takes some beating.

But in dropping everything but the first-act hook and general idea of a conspiracy and chase, Spielberg's *Minority Report* writers have left themselves with some uncomfortable holes to fill - including an all-new ending, an all-new victim, an all-new villain, an all-new rationale for the title, and an all-new point for the story to make. A number of writers have had a go at this in addition to the credited two (though not, as I alleged last month, Dan O'Bannon; it was just his old co-writer Ron Shusett), with the entirely predictable result that the actual finale has the familiar feeling of having been erased and rewritten till all that's visible are the crossings-out. Among the cavernous plot holes in the final act, not one eyebrow is raised over the disappearance of one of the three central characters; and the failure to achieve closure on one of the key investigative strands would only seem intelligent and daring if the rest of the finale wasn't so formula-bound.

It goes without saying that all this is necessary because Phil K.'s universe is not the most Hollywood-friendly one to start with. His typical heroes are defeated men, trapped in small lives that are falling apart around them, and Dick's original John Anderton was a model citizen of this world: fiftysomething and overweight, preoc-

cupied to the point of paranoia with workplace rivalries, retirement prospects, and his wife's suspected infidelities. Turning such a character into Tom Cruise isn't a mere matter of casting, drastic recharacterisation, and annoyance limitation. There are certain things a summer-movie hero has to do and be that sit uncomfortably in Dick's narrative world: not just jumping over the tops of cars, but identifying and defeating a villain; affirming and instating the utopia of family; operating within a tightly restricted range of permitted motivational backstories and learning arcs, from amongst which Spielberg's gang have chosen a *very* off-the-shelf bereavement-guilt-atonement-closure sequence.

For Dick, the ethics of Precrime were of no interest whatever, and his ending the exact opposite of Spielberg's. In the story, Anderton *saves* Precrime by deliberately *committing* the crime he's predicted to, even though he knows the prediction itself has been decisively exposed as invalid and he's now operating as a free moral agent. For the PKD version of Anderton, this sacrifice of career and liberty is a flawed man's redemptive act of heroism, and his salvation of a provenly inaccurate system is welcomed as a happy outcome. But one gets the sense that, even before liberal sensibilities have got to work on the various discomforts of all this, Spielberg's writers have had to negotiate hard with Cruise's people to give his character any flaws whatever - so that all he ends up with is a mild indulgence in rather harmless-looking illegal mood-enhancers with no obvious

addictive properties or side-effects, and all strictly in the cause of coping with clips of his backstory.

Away from this centre, many things in *Minority Report* do work very well. There's a good sense of the cinematic strength of Dick's hook, the suspense of approach to a *La Jetee* catastrophe already seen, and repeatedly reviewed, but not yet understood. A substantial plot improvement is the guarding of the predicted victim's obscurity till the last possible moment (where Dick rather threw away plot momentum by having him enter Anderton's life within a couple of pages), and it's a pleasant surprise that so much room is made for further twists between the false ending and the real one. As picture-maker, Spielberg is on top of his game, and if the images and ideas fall short of the grandeur of *AI* at its best, it's all a lot more vertebrate than *AI* at its worst, with plenty of pleasurable incidentals - the police spiders, the instant-makeup face morpher, the truly inspired conceit of an eye surgeon played by Peter Stormare. (Be very afraid.)

In the end, though, it's too trapped in its summer-movie narrative strait-jacket to fulfil its more earnest ambitions. The Precrime gimmick itself is really no more essential to Spielberg's themes than it was to Dick's, since the real issue in *Minority Report* is not prevention *versus* punishment but the fallibility of the system for determining guilt - irrespective of whether the failings arise from corruption, errors of detection, or miscarriages of justice. The question of whether states have the right to intern their citizens preventively may have turned out fortuitously topical, but it elbows aside the much bigger issue of what you do with those you convict. Here the Precrime finesse allows the convenient postulate of a penal system which wholly eliminates the roles of judge, jury, and sentencing, with a single one-fits-all penalty covering all (but only) murders. And the nature of that penalty is crucial. In Dick's story, convicted pre-criminals were consigned to internment camps (not prisons; already an interesting move). But the film goes considerably further, humanely neutralising its pre-offenders by putting them in a state of suspended animation: an impressive fudge which has all the benefits of capital punishment (bad guys removed from all human function and denied all right to reha-



LL Cool J (left) and Chris Klein star as Jonathan Cross in *Rollerball*.

Facing page - Tom Cruise as John Anderton encounters robotic spiders in *Minority Report*

bilitation, but hey, they're bad guys, right?) without the embarrassing drawback of irreversibility in cases of wrongful conviction, which are almost as nonexistent as in the state of Texas. It even beats jail hands down, since as long as you're dozing in a tube nobody's going to razor you over, hook you on injectables, or push anything nasty up your bottom. You have to admire such a graceful tiptoe around a topic so very hot. If they could only close that lone-housewife-with-handgun security loophole, the system would be perfect indeed.

The politics are actually somewhat sharper in John McTiernan's famously troubled, widely reviled remake of *Rollerball*. Though almost no fun, this is a startling and provocative film that at the very least commits commercial suicide in several adventurous ways at once. The boldest shift is the transplantation of William Harrison's all-American fable of bread and circuses to the westernising lands of the new Asian republics (played on

screen by Canadian locations, but evocatively shot nonetheless). Given that the original *Rollerball* has already in effect been quite recently remade (as *Gladiator*), McTiernan's team have certainly gone for a far more interesting option in trying to update its themes to a post-American world only a year or two ahead of the present. In this version, *Rollerball* is economically and culturally a *global* phenomenon, symptom and symbol of the catastrophic dash to free enterprise in the less regulated corners of the non-western economy. Amid the new transna-

tional media wars, *Rollerball* is a worldwide phenomenon precisely because it's able to bypass the civilising controls that tame the west's homegrown sports, and to reinstate the world's satellite channels while terrestrial censorship stands helpless.

As it goes, all this works neatly as simultaneously an allegory of Hollywood and a perfectly literal account of the economics of fun in countries without a Hollywood. The stars of *Rollerball* private-jet around Asia and spend their evenings cocooned in limos and clubs, artificially insulated from a grim world of poverty, social disintegration, industrial collapse, and street riots, where the only negentropic force is organised crime. The central figure here is Jean Reno's grotesque media godfather, a survivor of Soviet power-broking who has adapted only too well to the new gangster economy: "I don't need to own the mines, because I own the man who owns the mines. I don't need a political position, because I own the men who do." In the end, needless to say, the tyranny of corpo-



Rollerball - Marcus Ridley (portrayed by LL Cool J) gets airborne

rate fixers is overthrown by the American hero through his traditional sportsmanly values of teamwork and, erm, individualism. (Anyone who sees a contradiction there can go straight back in the bunker.) But this obligatory cop-out resolution doesn't diminish the fairly stark picture of the sports media's role in taming the global underclass of beer-glugging miners. "We are not a rich country," remarks Jonathan's driver. "So how come," he asks back, "you bet your ass on the Rollerball?" "We call it the Atlantic City syndrome. Our problem, not yours." (Ah, but it is, as the star quickly finds out.)

This is a new world for SF cinema, though also one defiantly at odds with anything movie audiences are interested in. There are bizarre delights in the snippets of local TV embedded in the broadcast footage, some of them so strange that you suspect they might be real; and it's great to see western cinema latching on to the plot utility of the burqa. But the invitation to care, as the hero comes to care, about working-class life in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan is laudable mainly for its optimism; and the estrangement of audience is compounded by some astonishing editing that deliberately pushes the boundaries of comprehensibility to their limits and some way beyond. Like other action directors recently, McTiernan seems to be trying to kick off the lead boots of old-fashioned narrative and escape into a kind of pure adrenalin cinema of the set piece. But even with the generous assistance of commentators, on-screen character cards, and any amount of explanatory animated graphics, the rules of Rollerball remain impenetrable and the course of play impossible

to follow. It's a particularly unfortunate choice of film in which to introduce the device of an instant on-screen graph of audience interest level, especially given that the characters are minimally drawn and largely indistinguishable even without their helmets, while the dialogue is mostly shouted over a soundtrack of noise.

A much more successful experiment in post-Hollywood cinema is the screen version of *Resident Evil*, written and directed by the always interesting Paul W.S. Anderson (now sporting added initials; he must have finally got tired of being confused with his mesonymic US namesake). Anderson is himself something of a post-Hollywood figure himself, as a quondam Britpacker who did *Mortal Kombat* and *Event Horizon* before blowing his callbacks with the very disappointing and ill-fated *Soldier*; and *Resident Evil* is actually an all-European production, shot in Munich and post-produced in London. Its great strength, which it's hard to imagine surviving the Hollywood process, is a very focussed sense of what it needs to do to make its franchised material work as film. Anderson has clearly invested quality playtime in thinking about how the original Capcom games, and the whole genre of which they're a pinnacle, work as a story experience; and the result is is by a considerable way the most interesting attempt yet at adapting the narrative feel of big game titles to the cinema screen.

Anderson's coup of inspiration here is priming Milla Jovovich with a pre-credit dose of plot Rohypnol so that she initially remembers nothing of her character or environment. Just like a player making a first exploration of a

first-person game universe, she has no history, no memories; she simply wakes in an unfamiliar room, and begins to explore by opening drawers (clothing; toiletries; underwear; improbably-sized automatic weapon), before venturing out into the corridor, where there's a photo with a clue to her character's identity (false, as it turns out). But when she picks it up, a panel opens, revealing that the mansion is merely the antechamber to an underground game environment; and by the time she's found herself a skimpy red designer outfit with only half a skirt, we're ready for the team of expendables to do a synchronised crash-abseil in through the windows and initiate the serious gameplay. Things warm up nicely with some animated level maps of the plot, an early encounter with the game-hints genie, and a neatly nasty *Cube*-homage trap to traverse, all the while our heroine is discovering all kinds of cool stunt reflexes to combat packs of undead dobermans, as she slowly recovers her memories of her mission and the true nature of the plot.

Now, I've never played the *Resident Evil* games, but all this feels wonderfully authentic, perceptively capturing to film the experience of first-person gaming, and extending it in effective cinematic ways by marrying it to classical who's-next-and-who-can-you-trust movie plotting. After a brilliant first act, it does go a bit slack once we get into the obligatory zombie shootemups and a fairly shameless knockoff of *I am Legend*. But Anderson is never more at home than when picking off two-dimensional characters in well-staged and pacey set pieces, and it's hard to be too hard on a film that kills its mutant demon at the climax by nailing its tongue to a speeding train and dragging it along the tracks till it catches fire. For a Europud production, it has a refreshingly dextrous grasp of Hollywood pace and structure, but with hard edges that would surely have got knocked off in a process of mainstream studio development. The cast and dialogue are mostly rubbish, and some of the zombie acting is pure *Plan 9*, but it's still the first film of its kind to find cinematic analogues for some of the most powerful elements of console-game narrative, and technically at least marks something of a coming-of-age for its genre. Like *Minority Report*, it works with rather than against the fact that action-film plotting is deterministic, mechanical, and dumb; both films take the trouble to kit out their protagonists with a handy countdown wristpiece displaying time remaining to the climax. Like or lump it, we're looking at the future.

Nick Lowe

Resident Evil – Something terrible is lurking in the Hive and Alice (Milla Jovovich) must lead fellow commandos to isolate the virus that has wiped out Umbrella's entire research staff



Geese in the Mist

Zoran Živković

The ski lift stopped about one-third of the way up the slope. That was the last straw. If I'd been alone on the two-seater I would have cursed out loud. Instead I swore to myself, which wasn't the same. Only a coarse expletive would have let me vent my feelings. Some days nothing goes right. When that happens the best thing is to stay in bed, but we never know what awaits us, of course, so we dash headlong into the future like geese in the mist.

First there hadn't been any hot water in the bathroom. Irrate, I'd called the hotel reception only to learn that something was wrong with the boilers. I was kindly advised not to worry. The repairmen are at work and there should be hot water early in the afternoon. This information comforted me as my teeth chattered under the icy shower. As if this wasn't enough, the plastic shower cap slipped off my head for a moment, partially wetting my hair, so I had to wash it, although I hate to do it in cold water.

Then came the incident in the dining room. I shared the table with a family of three that had apparently never become accustomed to civilized behaviour. During every meal the father would return from the buffet table with a great deal more food than he could possibly eat. He always left more than half of it on his plate. Proudly. Plus, he chomped on his food with his mouth half-open. In addition, he always had a newspaper spread out in front of him.

The mother was excessively talkative and inquisitive. She didn't hesitate to adopt an intimate, chummy manner towards me even though I maintained a persistently reserved, formal demeanour and was several years older. She inundated me with questions, one of which was repeated every time we met. She was determined to find out why I had gone skiing alone, even though I'd made it perfectly clear more than once that I did not intend to disclose that information to her. The fact that I wasn't with anyone aroused her suspicions.

The son, somewhere around five or five-and-a-half, was a restless soul. He fidgeted in his chair, made a mess of the table, dropped his silverware on the floor, talked too

loud. His father paid not the slightest attention to this and his mother would mildly reproach him only when he had really gone too far. As soon as he started to play with the large tube of ketchup, I had a feeling something unpleasant would happen. As I hesitated, wondering whether to ask the boy's mother to take the tube away from him, he pointed it at me and squeezed.

I don't think I was his intentional target, but nonetheless a thick stream suddenly gushed across the table and hit me in the middle of my chest. A large red spot blossomed on my white sweater, as though I'd been wounded. I jumped off my chair, not knowing what to do in the initial confusion. The little boy started to giggle and his mother finally did what she should have done before it was too late. Taking the tube and putting it on the table, she said to her son, in a not-so-angry voice, that in the future he should be careful of the direction in which he pointed the ketchup.

The father's reaction pushed me over the edge. As though doing something perfectly natural and expected, he got up, put down his newspaper, took a linen napkin, and without a word began wiping it over my breasts, removing the ketchup! I looked at him in disbelief for several moments, as the desire to slap him rose sharply inside me. Nonetheless I held back, mumbled something angrily and left the dining room, feeling many inquisitive eyes on me.

As I tried to wash the spot out of my sweater as best I could with cold water, the weather changed. This happens very quickly in the mountains. When I entered the bathroom, the window had been filled with completely blue sky. Less than ten minutes later, the sky had turned into a grey rectangle with no depth. This was all I needed. Of the five days I had been there, two had been spent in the hotel because bad weather made it quite impossible to ski. I needed to head for the slopes as soon as possible if I didn't want this day to be ruined too.

As I hastily tightened my boot bindings in the ski room, I tore the nail on my right index finger. I bit my lower lip, as I always do when overcome by anger. If there's anything

I can't stand it's a torn nail, but I would have wasted a good 15 minutes if I'd taken off my boots, gone back to the room where I had some nail scissors, and then come back down to put my boots on again. I put on my mittens, hoping they would at least lessen the damage, but knew that the torn nail would keep bothering me until I took care of it. Everything was conspiring against me.

When I got out of the ski room, I found myself in a cloud. I could only see a few metres in front of me. From time to time, the ghostly figures of other skiers materialized out of the dense wall of grey. I slowly made my way towards the start of the ski lift, afraid that it might not be working. When the cloud cover is complete or a storm is blowing, they shut down the lift. Fortunately there was no wind, and if any luck stayed on my side only the area around the hotel would be veiled in mist, while the slopes at a higher altitude remained bathed in sunlight. At least, that's what I hoped.

I let out a noisy sigh of relief when I saw the moving line of skiers waiting to get onto the ski lift. Finally something good was happening in a day filled with nothing but bad luck! My satisfaction, however, did not last long. It was lessened by the person who sat next to me on the two-seater. The man had been behind me in the line, and I hadn't had any reason to turn around so I didn't see him until he appeared next to me on the lift. He didn't do anything to annoy me; his appearance alone was enough.

I have always been irritated by non-skiers who take skiers' places on the lifts instead of hiking through the mountains, which would be much healthier and more beneficial to them. In addition, the man was by no means suited to this place. Even if one disregarded his age — he must have been in his 60s — he had dressed in clothes more suitable for an evening on the town than trekking about the mountains in this weather: hat, bow tie, white shawl, long fur-trimmed coat, thin leather gloves, umbrella, fancy shoes. He would have a great time when he got out at the top. I smiled with a certain suggestion of malice and, as much as the cramped two-seater allowed, turned my back on him.

We had already come out of the cloud when the ski lift shuddered to a halt. I knew the reason immediately: the power had failed yet again. This had happened every day since my arrival. The hotel reception had a ready explanation for this inconvenience too. The worn-out grid was being renovated. Starting next season there would be no power outages. I felt like gnashing my teeth. Next season! A lot of good that would do me here and now. I was hanging helplessly a good 50 metres up in the air, in the company of a man who was probably the last person I wanted next to me, without the slightest idea of how long it would take for the power to come back.

As though reading my thoughts, the man suddenly addressed me: "Don't worry. The lift will start working in seven and a half minutes."

I have never been one to talk to strangers, particularly when I don't find them likeable and am in an awful mood, as I was at that moment. My first thought was not to reply, but then I would appear immature and impolite. I would have been happier if he hadn't said a word, if we

had spent that time in silence as we hung there, caught between heaven and earth, but now I had no choice. Social considerations, however, did not require me to be excessively polite.

"Really, seven and a half? You must be clairvoyant!" I made no effort whatsoever to hide the mockery in my voice. I turned my head briefly towards him, with an ironic smile, then turned away from him again.

"I'm not," was his simple reply.

The conversation might have ended here. If I had not said another word, no one could have reproached me for being rude. But the rage that had been gathering inside me all morning wouldn't let me stop.

"Then how do you know exactly what is going to happen?" This time I turned my head towards him a bit longer and was thus able to get a better look at his face. He looked exactly like my idea of a retired civil servant: plump cheeks, thick well-groomed moustache that did not go over his lip line, small watery eyes. His aftershave lotion had a pungent, piercing odour. I don't know where I got the impression, but I was convinced that he was either a widower or unmarried.

"It's not hard, if you know the cause. Then it's easy to predict the effect."

"So you know what caused the power failure, even though you were sitting here on the ski lift when it happened? Congratulations!" My voice was still sarcastic.

"It's my job, ma'am, to know," replied the man simply, as though this explained everything. My derision clearly had not got through to him. "The ski lift was stopped by the failure of a tiny part in the power sub-station. It's smaller than a matchbox. Such a tiny cause, and such a huge effect." He indicated the long line of seats in front of us filled with irate, impatient skiers.

"Isn't that utterly interesting!" I knew I had gone too far, but his equanimity was driving me mad.

"Yes," he replied, taking my words literally. "The future is most often shaped by small things, very rarely by incidents of large proportions. Take, for example, the fact that we had no hot water in the hotel this morning."

"You're staying at the hotel too? I haven't seen you."

"That's because I'm inconspicuous. People usually don't take notice of me, which is useful." He stopped briefly, hesitating. It seemed as though he'd been about to add something to his last sentence, but then decided to leave it unsaid. "The water heater broke down because of ordinary carelessness on the part of the man who maintains it. He let sleep get the upper hand and didn't do what he should have. And just see how many people had to take cold showers this morning as a result."

I was suddenly filled with unease. It seemed as though I could see the frosted glass on the shower door in my suite gradually turning transparent, making me visible to inquisitive eyes.

"Yes," I said, for the first time in a normal voice, "very unpleasant. In addition my shower cap slipped off by accident and my hair got wet." I instinctively touched the ends of my hair under my woollen hat. It was unnecessary, of course, because I had dried my hair with the hair drier before going out.

"Accident, yes," repeated the stranger. "A vague concept used as a good excuse for ignorance. There are no accidents, ma'am, only our lack of information."

I was angered by the superior tone in his voice. I have always felt aversion towards men who show off their alleged intelligence.

"But how could I know in advance that my shower cap would slip off? You can't predict something like that!"

He looked at me several moments without speaking. "Perhaps," he said at last. "But even you could have foreseen what happened to you in the dining room."

The anger that had just subsided flared up inside me once more. Not so much for the condescending "even you," although that was part of it. I felt myself exposed to unwanted looks again, naked. "You know about that too?" I asked. He certainly must have heard the snarl behind my words.

"Of course, I was there. I eat breakfast too."

"I didn't see you."

"I told you I'm inconspicuous. My seat is in the corner, behind your back. In any case, the incident was such that no one could have missed it."

"It all happened so fast," I said, as though defending myself. "I didn't have time to get out of the way. But it wasn't the boy's fault. His parents are to blame, of course."

"You are partially, too. It must have been clear to you from the start that something bad might happen to you in such company. You should have asked them to move you to another table. Particularly since there was no special reason for them to put you there in the first place. The waiter did it indiscriminately, just as he did with the other guests. He could have given you another seat the same way. Had he done that, your sweater wouldn't have a spot of ketchup on it now."

"But how can the waiter be blamed? He certainly couldn't have guessed what would happen."

"I didn't say he was to blame, just that his arbitrary decision was the cause that led to adverse effects. Fortunately, they are harmless in this instance."

I shot him a piercing glance. "Have you ever tried to remove a ketchup stain from wool?"

"No, I haven't. I suppose it isn't easy. What I wanted to say is that even the permanent loss of a sweater would be nothing dramatic. It is simply an unpleasant matter, basically nothing more serious than, let's say, tearing your fingernail."

I stared at him suspiciously, inadvertently wrapping my right index finger in the other fingers in my mitten. I didn't have a chance to say anything, however, because the ski lift started to move at that very instant. The seats stretching before us towards the mountaintop rose up briefly and then rushed forward like a team suddenly whipped by a coachman. The man pushed up his left coat sleeve a bit, looked at his watch and nodded in satisfaction. "Exactly seven and a half minutes, just as I told you."

He might have expected me to show a bit of admiration, but I didn't. I was haunted by completely different thoughts. "You say accidents don't exist?" I asked in a low voice.

"That's right, they don't" he agreed, also speaking more softly than before.

"So that means that you're not here by accident either. Who are you, anyway? What do you want from me?"

He didn't answer right away. We covered half the distance between two ski-lift towers in tense silence, staring each other in the eye. I tightly grasped the handles of the ski poles in my lap, slightly raising the pointed ends towards the other side of the seat. We were almost at the halfway station in the middle of the slope. All I had to do was raise the safety bar and quickly slide off my seat. I doubted he could have prevented me from doing it.

"Rest assured," he said at last. "You are in no danger from me. I don't want anything from you. I am only an observer."

"Observer?" I repeated questioningly, not knowing what else to say.

"Yes. I am here to see what you do. Nothing else."

"What do you mean, what I do? Isn't it obvious? I'm going to ski down the mountain. What else could I do?"

"There are many ski runs down the mountain."

"So? What difference does it make?"

"If it made no difference, I wouldn't be here now."

"I don't understand you. Do you mean to say that I will be in danger if I take one run and not another?"

"You? No. You are completely out of danger."

"Then who isn't? Please stop playing hide-and-seek with me. I'm not at all in the mood."

Silence followed once again. The halfway station was quite close. I raised the safety bar, ready to push off down the rise that reached up to the bottom of the seat. I expected him to say or do something, but he just looked at me wordlessly. We stayed like that without moving as we passed by the halfway station. The ski-lift employee standing in front of the hut made of roughly hewn wood looked at us briefly, uninterested. When he was behind our backs, I lowered the bar.

"I'm not playing hide-and-seek with you," he said with a slight sound of relief in his voice, as though pleased I hadn't got off the lift. "The fact is I am allowed to tell you very little. You must make the decision all by yourself. Any involvement on my part would create enormous difficulties."

"But what decision? You've still got me confused."

"Which run you choose to ski down the mountain."

"Why is that important? This run or that. They all lead down, don't they?"

"That's right. But what happens afterwards is not the same. Each run has its own continuation in the future. It is the start of a chain of events and each has a very different outcome. Fortunately, most of these outcomes are rather innocuous, but some are not. Sometimes, not often, such ordinary causes, such as which run you decide to take down the mountain, can result in truly catastrophic effects. You've heard the story of the butterfly harmlessly fluttering its wings and ultimately causing a hurricane on the other side of the world? Of course the butterfly is not to blame, but should one stand idly by and do nothing to interrupt the chain of events that leads to misfortune?"

At first I didn't know what to reply. The confusion that overcame me had muddled my thoughts. I stared dully at his round face, ruddy from the cold. His cheeks were dap-

pled with a network of winding capillaries, like those of a drunkard. He looked back at me with steady eyes in which I thought I could detect impatience and expectation.

And then, as though the internal fog clouding my mind weren't enough, one started on the outside too. It all happened in a split second, as usual. One moment we were travelling up through the brilliant blue mountain-morning sky, and the very next we were in the middle of a dense, grey, almost palpable mass. With my attention in disarray, I hadn't noticed the direction from which the cloud had come. Probably from below, otherwise I would have seen it before then. Everything suddenly became unreal around us. We seemed to be floating in nothingness. If it weren't for the empty seats that appeared at regular intervals going in the opposite direction, only visible when they were quite close to us, we would not have felt that we were moving at all.

"What do you do to prevent a disaster? Kill the butterfly, I suppose, before it flutters its wings? Remove the cause before it happens?" My voice was trembling slightly, although I tried to say this as calmly as possible.

"That would be the simplest thing, yes. Unfortunately, that cannot be done. You have to let the cause happen, and only then react."

I let out a deep sigh, then inhaled a breath of air. It was filled with tiny, prickly drops that would be used as the raw material for some future snow. "But how is it possible to tell which butterfly will cause the disaster? There are countless numbers of them."

"It's possible," replied the man tersely. I waited several moments, hoping he would add something more, but he remained silent.

"What is it about me that singles me out from the other skiers? Why is it important which ski run I in particular take? What if you are mistaken, what if I am not at all the right person?"

"We are not mistaken." Once again his self-confident brevity didn't tell me a thing.

"And that's all the explanation you have to offer?" My voice was tinged with anger again. "You appear out of nowhere, tell me a twisted, fantastic story and expect me to believe you."

"It isn't necessary for you to believe me." It seemed that nothing could shake the man's composure. "I am aware of the fact that my words must seem confusing and unconvincing. But I can't tell you anything else without disturbing an order that must remain untouched. I have actually told you too much already. The best thing would be for you to act as though we had never met, as though this conversation never took place. We will soon reach the top of the mountain. Get off the ski lift and simply take one of the runs down the slope. Don't even think about which one. Do it spontaneously, as you always do."

"Simply forget this ride up the ski lift? As though I came up to the top all alone?" It was impossible for him not to hear the disbelief mixed with hurt in my voice.

"That would be the best. In any case, you will never see me again. Nor will you find any trace of me at the hotel; it will be as if I never set foot on this mountain."

I chewed my lower lip and nodded. That instant the

cloud became drenched with brightness and started to thin. Soon we were above it, in perfectly clear air. The bright blue sky and sparkling white snow forced me to squint, and I lowered the sunglasses that had been pushed up onto my hat. We were almost at the top. The two skiers on the seat in front of us were just getting off.

I raised the safety bar slowly. I did not take my shielded eyes off the man on the seat next to me. I knew that he would not say anything else to me, and I had no desire to say anything to him, either. Maybe he was right, after all. Why not pretend that this meeting had never taken place? Isn't oblivion the best protection against the ugly things that happen in life?

I slipped off the ski lift seat, made a short turn to the right, and stopped a bit to the side of the path that skiers were taking down the slope. I stuck my poles into the snow in front of me and leaned on them. The seat I had just been on moved forward to a covered area where a huge horizontal wheel slowly turned. The seat made a semicircle around the wheel and then headed in the opposite direction, downhill.

The man did not let me out of his sight. First he turned around in his seat to keep me in his field of vision, and then when he realized that wouldn't be enough he got up and knelt on the seat, without taking care to lower the safety bar. The ski lift employee in front of the hut at the top shouted something at him in warning, but the stranger paid no attention. He stayed in the same position, holding onto the back of the seat as he rushed inexorably towards the edge of the cloud. He was too far away for me to make out the expression on his face, but it was easy to imagine.

I let the doughy grey matter swallow him up completely, then waited a few more moments. When it was certain there was no way he could see me, I did what was expected of me. Quite spontaneously, without thinking, I headed down one of the runs. As I always do. It was highly irresponsible with regard to the future, I know, but that responsibility had been forced upon me. I had never accepted it voluntarily. In addition, even if such a future were free of disaster, I would only be a puppet, my strings pulled by someone else's invisible hands. And if there is one thing I simply cannot tolerate, it is someone manipulating my life – regardless of the pretext.

Several moments later, when I too plunged into the sea of fog, I thought with a smile that we actually don't understand geese. Dashing headlong into the mist doesn't have to be the least bit unpleasant.

Translated from the Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic
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Zoran Zivkovic, who lives in Belgrade, last appeared in *Interzone* with "The Violin-Maker" (issue 176). That same issue of the magazine also ran an interview with him. His most recent work, before the above new piece, is a slim volume of six linked stories called *Biblioteka* ("The Library," 2002), which has also appeared in English in an American anthology, *Leviathan 3*, edited by Jeff VanderMeer and Forrest Aguirre.

Cruel and Unusual Punishment

Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff

— THE FIRST STATION —

And what have you laymen made of hell? A kind of penal servitude for eternity, on the lines of your convict prisons on earth, to which you condemn... “enemies of society,” as you call them...

Hell is not to love any more, madame. Not to love any more!

— Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest*

It was an act of war. Pure and simple. But the world courts didn’t get it – didn’t understand that there was an essential difference between an act of war and garden-variety terrorism. No one was innocent in a war. Everyone was either an ally or an enemy. Murder did not exist. Liam Connor knew that, if none of his accusers did. And he knew that one land’s butcher is another land’s hero.

That knowledge supported him through the trial and fed his natural courage, tested and fired through years of fighting. Courage allowed him to stand, unblinking, while the prosecutor read the charges and the witnesses described the carnage. While mothers wept and fathers hated him in silence. He’d confessed, as well, to the killing of a policeman in Derry a month before. It made no sense to conceal it; he was going to prison in any event, and was not ashamed to have done it.

He was not a terrorist, he told the jury; he was a soldier. His act was political, his intent to bring world attention back to Ireland. Sinn Fein might consider her freedom won. He did not. Freedom was not a matter to be compromised.

He was found guilty on twelve counts of first-degree murder. The jury called for the death penalty. He’d expected no less. He would be a martyr as well as a hero.

— THE SECOND STATION —

Human imagination long ago pictured Hell, but it is only through recent skill that men have been able to give reality to what they had imagined.

— Bertrand Russell, *Sceptical Essays*

He was transferred to an international prison facility outside Prague. He saw the protestors as his transport pulled through the gates, milling in the sharp sunset patterns of umber shadow and orange light, their placards waving, condemning the death penalty. He gave them no thought.

They put him in an antiseptic cell next to an American. The two cells shared a wall with a transparent section that darkened and lightened at the whim of the gaolers and a door of sorts composed of gleaming metal bars that could retract into the ceiling – at the whim of the gaolers.

Through the transparent panel Connor could see the American as he sat on his bunk, pale and sweating, wringing his hands. He whispered to himself and addressed the ceiling as “God.”

Connor sent a glance at the ceiling of his own cell. There was a water stain above the bunk. Or perhaps it was a shadow – it was hard to imagine a stain would be allowed to exist in such sterile surroundings. Squinting, he saw it as a guardian angel – here the wings, there the

long flowing robes. He wondered what the American saw hovering over his bunk.

When he could stand the babbling of Bedlam prayer no longer, Connor rapped on the translucent barrier between him and the American. "Hey!" he said. "What's your name?"

The young man blinked at him, eyes pale and watery in a damp, grey face. "Uh... Roarke." His voice was as clear as if the barrier were made of fishnet.

Connor smiled. "Good Irish name," he said. "What're you in for?"

Roarke giggled nervously and shrugged, then straightened his shoulders. "I did my wife and kid," he said.

Connor tried not to look appalled. "Why?"

Roarke radiated a halo of machismo. "She was cheating on me. Kid probably wasn't even mine."

"So you killed them?"

The shoulders sagged; the halo evaporated. "Yeah." He blinked and squinted. "Yeah... Oh, God," he said to the ceiling, and started to sob.

Connor lay down on his bunk.

— THE THIRD STATION —

If it's heaven for climate, it's hell for company.

— J. M. Barrie, *The Little Minister*

"Hey, you! Irish!"

He woke with a start and stared across the cell. The little American was hunkered down on his haunches, peering at him through the transparent panel, looking like a faded orangutan cadging peanuts.

"Connor," he said. "The name's Connor."

"The terrorist?" He pushed forward, steaming the transparent barrier. "They said they were sending an IRA terrorist up."

"I'm a soldier. We're at war."

The American laughed. "Right. You and nobody else. Did you know Ireland is about the only place in the world that's not at peace?" he asked, suddenly pert. "I read that in *Time* magazine. Really embarrassed the Sinn Féin. Doesn't do a whole lot of good to sign treaties when a bunch of fanatics won't give up the fight. The only place in the world that's not at peace." He repeated and shook his head. "Man, I sure wouldn't want that on my conscience."

"I'd say you have enough on your conscience already."

Roarke laid his palms flat against the panel, smearing it with oily little streaks that were quickly broken down by the citrifier in the material. "They say," he almost whispered, "you blew up a school bus full of little kids. How the hell could you do something like that?"

"The price of freedom is often high. How the hell could you do what *you* did?"

Roarke's mouth wriggled. "Troop cuts. Lost my job. Army was my life. Couldn't stand losin' them, too."

"Dead's not lost?"

Roarke started to shake. He got up and moved away from the bars, wiping his hands on his pants... over and over. "I'm payin' for it. God, two days!"

"That's when the axe falls?"

Roarke threw his head back and looked down his nose like a startled horse. "Naw. I did a deal. Instead of death, I get The Light. The God-damned Light." Connor could hear the capital letters.

"What light?"

"S'got some doctor's name – uh... Z'gorsky – something like that. The Z'gorsky Wave – that's what the doctors call it. Everybody else just calls it The Light." He glanced back over his shoulder as if "it" were prowling the corridors.

Connor shrugged and shook his head.

"It's an experiment. They told me if I'd participate in the experiment, I didn't have to die." Roarke giggled and his Adam's apple bobbed like a fishing float. "I said 'yes.' Jesus, now'm not sure."

Connor sat up. An alternative to death. "So, what's it do? Brainwash you?" He'd lived through brain-washing and torture. He glanced down at his three-fingered left hand – even that.

"I don't know." Roarke swallowed, making a gulping sound. "To hear them" – he jerked his head toward the corridor – "you'd think it was *worse* than dying."

Connor puzzled. "Them?"

"Listen."

He did. Out of the background noise of the cellblock he picked out a high-pitched gibbering.

Roarke grinned manically. "J-Block. The one's who've 'seen the light'." He giggled at his poor joke. "Maybe I was better off with the shot. ...When're you going up?"

"Three weeks." Connor shivered involuntarily. He hoped Roarke hadn't seen it. He wasn't afraid to die.

"Hey, why'd you confess to killing that cop? The kids were enough to get you hung."

"What does it matter? It's not as if they can kill me more than once."

"Yeah, but a lot could happen to you before you die. I heard rumours about what they do to cop-killers."

"In this nice little safe house?" Connor chuckled. "Who could break in and get to me?"

"Who says they'll need to break in?" Roarke went to sit on his bunk. "Dinner real soon," he said, smiling affably. "Food's pretty good here. Better than Army chow."

The food was good, but Connor's hunger was overwhelmed by the pungent, metallic taste of terror that wafted up from J-Block. On the way to the cafeteria, he listened. There were voices that shrieked things like: "I won't eat, damn you! You can't *make* me eat!" There was a keening wraith-voice that chanted "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry" in an endless litany. He concentrated on not getting the food stuck in his throat. Then he slept.

When he woke the next morning, Roarke was full of news. The prisoner in cell A25 had tried to kill himself with a plastic spoon. "Tried to choke himself," he said soberly. There were dark circles under the diluted eyes. "They took him to the hospital for an imp."

"A what?"

"Nutritional implant. Your stomach shrivels up, but you don't starve. Read all about it in a medical journal."

"You read a lot."

"Not a whole lot else to do unless you're into pumping iron. I been here for two months. Lawyer's been trying

to get me a retrial – you know, a sanity thing. Huh! I don't think they buy that any more. Anyway, my appeals ran out, so—" He shrugged. "Isn't your lawyer trying to get you a lesser sentence?"

"No chance of that."

"He could ask about The Light. I mean, after all you're a celebrity."

"So, where do you do all this reading?" asked Connor.

"Library. Anybody can use it. Even terminals like you. We go after breakfast. You can have books or discs. I look forward to it."

Anticipation, mused Connor – a precious commodity among the damned.

— THE FOURTH STATION —

There are only two countries: heaven and hell; but two conditions of men: salvation and damnation.

— George Bernard Shaw, *John Bull's Other Island*

They went to the library after breakfast. Connor spent his time ferreting out articles on the Zagorsky Wave. What he found made little sense. He understood the claim that the Wave affected the workings of the brain, but the terminology was impenetrable. He knew precious little about neural pathways or endorphins or what happened during REM sleep. There were references to sodium amytal, the so-called "truth serum" – something with which he was familiar.

That afternoon, he asked his lawyer if he could make a deal to be part of the Zagorsky experiment.

"A lab rat, Liam? Are you sure you want that?"

"Beats the alternative, don't you think?"

The lawyer stared down at the lapels of his impeccable blue suit. "What do you know about the Zagorsky process, Liam?"

"I read some about it, today. Fancy name for brainwashing. Kind of like going to a salon instead of a barber shop."

"It's a little more than that." The lawyer jerked his well-groomed head toward the corridor. "You may have noticed that some of your fellow inmates are..."

"Mental? Hell, this place is more Bedlam than prison. Grown men trying to choke themselves with plastic spoons. But I'm not mental."

The lawyer gave him a long, steady look, then said, "I'll see what I can do. But I think you might want to talk to your man with the spoon."

Connor pondered the meeting as he stood in the yard that afternoon, watching nearly naked tree limbs toss in the chill wind, stubborn leaves clinging to them like bright stars fallen and tangled in the twigs. Mountain peaks gleamed above the walls, pristine and white. It was a most pleasant place. One could do worse than to live out one's life here. Except perhaps for those who seemed bent on self-destruction – who seemed to Connor legitimately mad.

Was that the effect of Zagorsky's Wave? He crossed himself. God... suicide. Never that. As long as there was life, there was hope. He flexed his half-ruined hand and felt the wraith-pain of the missing fingers.

That evening in the library, he read more about criminal medicine – about how lobotomizing the violent supposedly made them forget what it was to be violent. Was that what the Wave was about? Making someone forget why he'd done what he'd done? Did they think Roarke could be redeemed by clipping a few neural pathways?

Redemption. Was that what it was about? Redemption was not something the criminal justice system generally concerned itself with. If the Wave was some scientific way of redeeming souls, it hardly answered the human conception of justice. If it was a form of truth serum, they'd have no reason to use it on him. He'd never claimed he wasn't guilty of blowing up that school bus. He'd told the truth at his trial and the truth had damned him in the eyes of a jury that did not understand the nature of the struggle. Some things were simply larger than life.

He liked the sound of that. It read like an epitaph: *Some things are larger than life.*

— THE FIFTH STATION —

Suddenly to realize that one is sitting, damned, among the other damned – it is a most disquieting experience; so disquieting that most of us react to it by immediately plunging more deeply into our particular damnation in the hope... that we may be able, at least for a time, to stifle our revolutionary knowledge.

— Aldous Huxley, *Grey Eminence*

On Roarke's day, they took him at sunrise. He was white-faced and terrified; his stubble of mousy beard stood out on his face as if every pore were squeezed tight. He seemed about ready to beg for the death his lawyer had worked so hard to put off.

They brought him a Protestant minister. He'd told Connor he was Protestant the first day. "I s'pose that means you hate me, huh?" he'd asked.

"It's not that simple."

Now he was begging information from the minister, a weary-looking man with bottomless, dark eyes and a mouth devoid of smile lines.

"Tell me, please," begged Roarke. "What's it like? Will it hurt?"

The minister hesitated. "I don't know what it's like, son. But I promise you, there will be no pain."

Roarke went away down the corridor with his two guards and his frayed minister, feet dragging the shining tiles. Connor watched the surveillance cameras swivel to follow the little parade, then went back to his bunk.

Later that morning, he tried to pry more information out of the library's medical journals. Difficult, even with a dictionary. *Rather than occluding select involuntary background neural processes, he read, the Wave produces the opposite effect. It defeats the natural occulting influences of the conscious.*

The dictionary was American, but he thought the word definitions had to be fairly close. *Occlude*, he read, *to close or shut off; obstruct*. He shook his head and looked up "occult." As he expected, it said something about supernatural influences. The second definition wasn't any

clearer: *Available only to the initiate; secret.* And the third: *Beyond human understanding.*

Beyond the understanding of Liam Connor, at any rate. "Hell!" He gave up in a flash of temper, closing the books. Damned scientific voodoo. He wouldn't be half-surprised to find out this whole business was some slick psychological shell game intended to drive the inmates mad. Smoke and mirrors. He'd seen the state Roarke was in this morning. The man was *primed* to go mad. The mere suggestion that some unknown fate awaited him might send him over the edge.

But he wasn't Roarke. He wasn't some guilt-ridden chauvinist. He hadn't destroyed his own family and, with them, any dignity or integrity he might have possessed.

His lawyer appeared while he was still sitting in the library – no longer reading, but just watching tongues of autumn flame dance in the trees. They went to a small, grey, glass-fronted room with a flat-screen monitor set into one wall. They sat at an austere table across from each other.

The lawyer folded his hands atop his fine leather briefcase. "The judge feels your crime warrants letting you enter the experimental programme. The press is all over it, of course. Have you seen the crowd in the forecourt?"

"I saw a bunch of sad-looking rowdies when they brought me here. What's it to do with me?"

In answer the lawyer turned to the television screen. "Voice ID – John Woods. SecureCam, forecourt, please."

The screen leapt to life. It showed Connor a rabble among which no two looked as if they'd come from the same neighbourhood or stock. They waved placards, they held hands and prayed, they stood in mute dissent. They were adults of all ages, they were children. Closest to the camera's watchful eye, was an entire family: a woman with hair the colour of black cherries, a weary-looking man with a three-day growth of greying beard, a girl who possessed the same deep auburn hair as her mother. Pressed against the woman's breast was a photograph of a young girl who could only be daughter to her and sister to the other girl.

God in heaven, he thought, who brings a child to a place like this?

As if she'd read his thoughts through the camera eye, the girl raised her eyes to the lens.

Connor glanced away. "I suppose these folks think I should be executed."

"They're divided. Some believe the Z-Wave is a superior alternative to the death penalty. Others believe it meets the criteria for a cruel and unusual punishment. They want the execution to proceed... as a kindness."

Connor gazed thoughtfully at the display. "And those?" He gestured to the family.

"Which?"

"The couple there with their girl. What do they want?"

"They're from Kilhenny," the lawyer said.

It was answer enough. "Death, a kindness?"

The man tilted his head and studied Connor at an angle. "They say there are worse things than death."

"*They are full of shit. Nothing you can live through is worse than death.*" He unconsciously twitched his half-hand, then focused his eyes on the lawyer's studious face.

"Stop your lobbying. They're not going to repeal my conviction, and I'd sooner face Dr Zagorsky's wee light bulb than an infuser full of poison. I've been studying this Wave thing and I think I've understood it. I've watched how they twitched the poor bastard in the next-door cell all to pieces before they took him. It's nothing but a high-tech light show, but by the time a man gets there, he's a guilt-bomb just waiting to explode. It's all up here, you see." He tapped a finger to his forehead. "They play games with the mind and then put on the show. And when it's all over." He snapped his fingers. "But I don't snap. I already know that. Christ, there isn't a kind of pain made that I haven't lived through."

The lawyer pursed his lips. "Liam, what do you remember about the Kilhenny bombing?"

"I remember all of it."

"Do you? You watched the bus burn?"

"Hell, no. I was a little busy trying to get away – for all the good it did me."

The lawyer nodded, watching his fingers tap the table top. After a moment of hesitation, he put his briefcase onto the tabletop, opened it, and pulled out a collection of papers. He spread them out on the table.

They were not papers; they were photographs of children. Of families. "Recognize any of these?"

"No." Liam felt anger flare behind his breastbone and tamped it down. This was a stupid ploy.

"They're–"

"I know who they are. Or at least who you'll tell me they are. Kids killed in the bombing. You'll not catch me in a moment of sentimental weakness." He pushed the closest photo – a school yearbook shot of an auburn-haired girl – back across the table. He didn't have to ask to know that it was her family praying him to death in the forecourt. She was the image of her mother and sister.

"Her name was Heather Rose."

Liam shook his head and smiled. "You'd make a lousy shrink."

The lawyer showed no embarrassment at being caught out. "You'll go in three days... Wednesday," he said, gathered up the photos, laid them in his briefcase, and left.

— THE SIXTH STATION —

Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed

In one self place; for where we are is Hell,

And where Hell is, there must we ever be.

– Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Dr Faustus*

Connor heard Roarke's high-pitched gibbering before he reached their cell block. He passed the departing minister in the corridor.

"Didn't hurt, eh, reverend?"

The worn out eyes surveyed him and he swore they missed nothing. "Physically, no."

"Ah, merely destroyed his mind?"

The man uttered a ghost-laugh. "No. Not that either." He moved away, clutching his naked Protestant cross.

Roarke was on the floor of his cell, banging at his head

— THE SEVENTH STATION —

with closed fists. "He saw-he saw-hesawhesawhesaw!"

Connor got down on his haunches at the barrier between their cells. "Roarke!" he called. "Army boy!"

The pale eyes found him and fixed on his face. They were awash in tears and startlingly transparent. He could see through them right into Roarke's soul. Right into his complete and utter emptiness. He was a vacuum. Sucked inside out.

Connor shook himself. "What happened to you? Can you tell me what happened?"

Roarke's mouth twitched. "It's a room," he said softly. "Just a room. Looks like a... a" – he giggled – "like the places Jenny gets her hair..." He blinked and his mouth opened and closed soundlessly.

"A room?" prompted Connor.

Roarke nodded. "With a chair. The Light is over the chair. You... I sat down. No straps. You just sit. And they turned on the Light and – and then it was Dark." He whimpered. "I smelled her perfume."

He began to gibber again, pitch rising. Then he flung himself at the door of his cell and thrust his arms through the bars. "*For God's sake! Please! Please! Please!*"

Connor rocked back on his butt and covered his ears. "Please *what*, dammit?" he yelled. "What the hell do you want them to do?"

Roarke's face turned toward him, pressed against the metal bars, twisted with anguish. "*Kill me! Oh, God, please make them kill me!*" His eyes lit suddenly and he moved away from the door toward the connecting wall. "You! You kill people all the time."

Connor backed away, repulsed. "I've no reason to kill you."

Roarke put out his hand. "Please."

Curiosity nailed him. "Why?"

"Because I saw..." Madness began to seep in and lap around his eyes. "He called me 'daddy.' Oh God, Cody!"

"Saw what? Who's Cody?"

"Me." He disappeared into himself, then, and all Connor's attempts to reach him failed.

While Connor lay awake, Roarke slept, exhausted, on the floor next door. It was not a quiet sleep. He twitched like a dying insect, mumbling and grinding his teeth. The grinding was bad – worse when it was interspersed with his whimpered pleas: "Take me please take me please take me..." Litany of the damned.

Morning brought no relief. Roarke didn't go for more than minutes at a time without lapsing into his guilt-horror. That meant Connor got no more than a catnap, but he'd lots of time to wonder what kind of deal he'd struck – as perhaps he was supposed to wonder. Perhaps, having observed that he was not, like his near neighbour, a guilt-burdened lunatic, his captors had settled on sleep deprivation as a means to soften him up. They'd be disappointed. He knew as much about sleep deprivation as he did about other forms of torture, and seeing Roarke like this only made him more determined not to succumb.

They took Roarke away to J-Block while he was in the library. Connor didn't see him again. After, Connor wondered if the whole thing wasn't a scam and Roarke an actor playing a part.

Heaven gives its glimpses only to those

Not in position to look too close.

– Robert Frost, *A Passing Glimpse*

On Wednesday morning Liam Connor went down to the Lab. His curiosity about the Zagorsky process had blossomed into strange anticipation. If this was a test of his will, he welcomed it. He was more uneasy of the watchful, stoic guards than he was of the Light.

The Catholic priest they brought to walk with him to the Lab was every bit as dog-eared as Roarke's minister.

"I won't need last rites," Connor told him dryly. "I'm not dying today."

"You may wish to make your peace with God," the priest said.

Connor bristled. "I've no peace to make, Father. I did my duty before the Lord, and I'll work it out with Him in the next world."

The priest merely looked at him through eyes Connor told himself saw nothing but his skin, then moved his side down the hall. He began to pray somewhere along the way. Connor found it annoying.

As Roarke had said, the Lab was just a room with a chair on a revolving pedestal, like a dentist's chair. The floor was carpeted in a soft, institutional pastel; the walls were dove grey. It wasn't an unpleasant room. The only things about it that screamed *laboratory* were the monitoring cameras... and the Light itself. That was bracketed to the ceiling directly over the chair.

Connor examined it as he sat beneath. It looked like nothing so much as a great crystal egg with deeply incised facets radiating from the crown. It was the sort of thing a little boy or girl dreamed of finding in their Easter basket. The sort of thing that would hold their attention for hours as they turned it and marvelled at the way colours burst from its facets.

Connor smiled up at it, then looked over at the white-coated doctor who hovered near the door. "Pretty," he said.

She moved to stand beside the chair. "Do you understand the procedure?"

"I think so. It's some sort of neural gag. It's supposed to de-occult my synapses." The corners of his mouth curled into a half-grin. "Take the devil out of me, I guess."

She nodded. "I suppose that's one way of putting it. You understand that it won't harm you physically or mentally?"

"No? You wouldn't lie to me now, would you, doctor?"

"I have no reason to lie, Mr Connor."

"Then explain it to me."

"All right. The procedure... causes the mind to work more... efficiently. It clears the pathways between the conscious and the subconscious." She stopped and looked at him the way he was sure she looked at all her other lab specimens. It wasn't very flattering to have a pretty woman look at you as if you were sitting in a petrie dish. "That doesn't disturb you, does it?"

"Not a bit."

"Then, I think we're ready to proceed." She drew a small, flat packet from the pocket of her lab coat and pro-

duced an infuser. "This is a muscle relaxant. It will keep you from getting the jitters."

"I don't have 'the jitters,' doctor."

"Not now, but you may. It happens."

"I don't get the jitters."

She gave him the shot anyway. "Procedure," she told him, then turned and left the room, the door opening and closing of its own accord. The ambient light dimmed.

Connor sat and waited, watching the crystal egg. There was nothing, he realized, to keep him from taking his eyes from it or from closing them. Odd. You'd think they would make sure he looked at the damn thing. What would they do, he wondered, if he simply refused to look?

After several moments the light began to glow softly; deep azure light pulsing from its depths to wash through the facets. The hues shifted toward purple, deepened, brightened, flowed to crimson. When it was an amber that rivalled any sunset Connor had ever seen, it blossomed into a golden rose of surreal beauty.

He forgot he'd meant to look away. He had no desire to close his eyes. He was bathed in a divine glow that reminded him of Jacob's Ladders on a clouded day and in which he could imagine Angels descending and ascending along ladders of light. He could almost see them floating in their brilliant auras, faces radiant. Singing. "Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war..." It was a song from his youth – familiar, comforting.

He grinned at the memories that evoked of great, stone halls alight with candles and smelling of polished wood and musty cloth. Of the blazing, rose-amber splendour of sun-filled stained glass from which a river of light cascaded over the altar with its life-sized crucifix and sea of votive candles. The candles caught the Holy Light and rose up to meet it, forming a shroud of glory that grew brighter, deeper with every breath Liam took, until the Christ figure was completely ablaze with it, swaddled in lucent brilliance.

In a heartbeat, the blaze lost its divinity. It was earthly flame now, torrid and rapacious, and it formed an impenetrable wall about the altar. He could feel the heat of it on his face. The altar and crucifix would be destroyed. Already they were blackening and he could hear the sounds of the fire consuming them – the cracking and groaning of wood and glass, the roar of many tongues of flame.

He struggled to penetrate the veil of fire and found he could just make out the shape of the blackened altar. Oddly, the flames seemed not to diminish it. Instead, it grew as if the fire fed it. It was emerging from the holocaust, and Liam felt a surge of something like victory in the symbology.

Victory lasted a matter of seconds, for the altar changed, twisted by fire into something other. It took Liam only a moment to recognize it – a school bus. And he remembered that, fleeing the scene, he had heard the windows cracking like rock candy from the heat, the groan of dying metal.

The Angels didn't sing now, they screamed.

Liam's rage was hotter than the remembered flames; he already suspected the infuser had contained more than a simple "muscle relaxant." He was madder at himself for getting sucked down memory lane. He shut down his mem-

ory and his imagination, feeling a fierce sense of triumph.

Nice try. That's what he'd tell them when this was over. *Nice try, but I knew what you were about.*

He looked up into the blaze of glory again. Where he had glimpsed Angels and flaming school buses, now he saw only light and deception. He wondered if there were subliminal images in the Light – movies being played into his eyes. He smiled. Knowledge was power.

With a suddenness that stole his thoughts, the Light went out and he was plunged into darkness so thick it seemed to have mass and weight. Did they realize he'd found them out?

He waited for the room lights to come up, waited for the doctor to reappear and tell him he was impervious to their machinery – or to lie and tell him he was not. But the darkness continued.

Perhaps the session wasn't over. Perhaps this was all part of it. Roarke had mumbled something about darkness. It was pitch black – a strange, close darkness, stagnant, almost stifling.

After a time – it might have been five minutes or 15 – a breath of air fanned his face. He stiffened involuntarily.

"Who's there?"

The darkness did not blink; the silence did not breathe.

"Who's there?" he insisted, but no one answered.

Well, of course, no one answered. The room was empty. Had someone entered he would have heard the door open and close. It made, he recalled, a distinctive popping sound, like on those old science-fiction shows.

The air must have come from a vent somewhere in the room. He tried to recall if he'd seen one. He had not. Which didn't mean there wasn't one. As he considered whether to get up from the chair and try to find the door, the room breathed once again. This time there was about it a faint smell of hot oil as if a motor somewhere in the bowels of the building was overheating.

The smell was accompanied by a soft sound as if someone shuffled across the institutional grey carpet. An uncontrollable chill scurried up Liam Connor's spine. He sat forward in the chair, put his feet to the floor in order to rise. Behind him, something brushed the wall, though it might have been the sound of his own hair rising. He held very still, stopping even his breath. He heard breathing. Where did it come from?

"Who's there?" he asked again, and felt foolish. No door had opened, no one had entered. He imagined the cool, crisp doctor sitting in a chair before a bank of monitors, observing him. Seeing what effect the combination of darkness and stealthy sound had on his nerves. Sweat trickled down his back, and he cursed himself for seven kinds of a fool – quivering at simple darkness and a wee sound.

He got to his feet and tried to pinpoint the source of the noises. But they seemed placeless. Recordings, he suspected. The stuff of séances.

"Where've you hidden the speakers, doctor?" he asked the darkness.

A sigh answered him, seeming to come from all about him. He turned and moved away from the chair, picking a direction at random. He stopped when he met the wall and tried to calculate at what height the sound had

seemed to originate. He ran his hands over the wall, seeking some flaw in the surface. There was none within reach.

He was engrossed in this when the sounds came to him again, this time from behind him. He turned, putting the solid wall at his back and moved back toward the centre of the room, steps careful, silent. Drawing near where he thought the chair should be, his mind tried to tell him that someone sat there in front of him, perhaps watching him with extended senses. The thought was ludicrous. He would find the chair empty. He moved forward, hands extended.

"There is nothing there," he said aloud.

His assertion was answered by a sob and the smell of roses. The voice was a man's, he thought, and the chilling thought came to his mind that somehow someone had shut down the power and come in here to kill him. The place was full of career guards who might have very personal feelings about the death of the Derry policeman.

He reached for the chair, missing it, swearing he felt the subtle field of warmth given up by another person's body.

A man's voice said, "Why?" and Connor found himself awash in a great wave of sorrow. He'd asked that question of God at his father's funeral. Sorrow was a hateful emotion.

"Why what, damn you?" He lashed back and withdrew, looking for a patch of darkness that was blacker than the rest – a piece he could suck himself into and hide.

The man said, "What have you done?"

Liam lunged forward and came into violent contact with the infernal chair. He fell against it, over it, and landed heavily on the floor. He struggled to a sitting position, reaching upward for the chair. His fingertips touched flesh – warm, soft as sunlight.

"Go with God," whispered the unknown in a new voice – a woman's voice, or a girl's.

The world tilted. He recoiled, spilling himself onto the floor again. While he lay there, immobile, something brushed his face. Something warm, gentle, like a mother's kiss. He reached for the voice, for the fingertips, for the scent of roses, but there was nothing but the chair – hard, cold, unyielding.

The lights came back up, suddenly, blinding him. He blinked rapidly, rubbing at his eyes. Spots chased each other across his field of vision. Realizing how awkward and pathetic he must look crumpled before the chair, he pulled himself to his feet, straightened his clothing and his thoughts, and waited.

There was a soft hum, the door hissed back into its frame and the lady doctor reappeared, her face completely neutral except for a slight warping between her brows that could have been frustration, anxiety, or merely distraction. Liam was willing to bet on frustration. He'd failed to buckle, which meant either that he was proof to their brainwashing or that he'd exposed their fraud.

"Sodium amytal?"

She gave him a level look, her lips slightly compressed. "Something like that."

He nodded, smiling. "Who was in here with me? Or was that all special effects?"

Her eyes came to his face, curious and bright. "What do you mean?"

"The smell of oil, then roses. The man's voice, then the little girl's... It's about the copper, isn't it?" he asked.

"Excuse me?"

"The policeman. In Derry."

"Mr Connor, we have no control over what happens in here."

"The hell you don't. Come on, doctor. I've seen through you. There's no sense in keeping up pretence. Your damned 'procedure' failed. Now tell me: who was in this room with me?"

"No one and nothing that you didn't bring in with you."

Intentionally ambiguous, it was a psychologist's answer. A sphinx's answer.

"I saw that old movie," he said and let himself be taken back into the custody of his guard.

— THE EIGHTH STATION —

Then I saw that there was a way to hell, even from the gates of heaven... So I awoke, and behold, it was a dream.

— John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*

Not unexpectedly, he dreamt that night of a church with breathtaking stained-glass windows, of a crucifix ablaze with the glory of God, of an altar that morphed into a school bus, of a fire raging out of control. He woke soaked in anger and sweat. The quality of light in the cell and the stirrings up and down the corridor told him that it was close to sunrise. He didn't try to return to sleep; his anger wouldn't let him. Instead, he thought about what he would have for breakfast.

The guard who came to fetch him to the cafeteria looked at him through narrowed eyes that seemed to weigh and judge. Connor wanted to shake him and demand to know the contents of his thoughts, but instead, ground his teeth and kept silent. Was this the one who'd tried to kill him? Or had he merely hallucinated someone into the room because he could feel the hatred the guards were too professional to show?

No. He'd hallucinated nothing. Anything in that room had been put there by his gaolers. He had taken nothing into that room with him. And he had taken nothing away from it but an abiding rage.

There were sprays of roses on the tables today. Their scent was heavy in the air, all but overwhelming the aroma of food. Connor asked the woman behind the service counter why.

It was just past Mother's Day, she explained. A local nursery had more roses than they could sell. They had come here. She smiled then, not at him, but at herself. "My Jenny brought me a rose in a spray of heather," she said, and fingered a sprig of the stuff that was pinned to her pristine white smock.

He looked at her face for the first time, and caught the look she directed at the tiny purple flowers tucked amid the grey-green foliage. The same look the Madonna gave to the Christ child.

He went to his rose-laden table, wondering what his own mother would have done yesterday. His father had passed away when he was a youth, but his mother still lived in Belfast, on the same street in the same house she had shared with her husband from the day they married. Now she shared it with a ghost and a memory.

How did she remember her only son, he wondered? As the hard-bitten soldier shown in mug shots on national TV? As the angry teenager who had disappeared into the underground of an IRA splinter group? Or as the little boy who had brought her handfuls of pilfered flowers and crumbled cakes on Mother's Day? Did she know what he'd done? Was she proud of him for continuing the fight? Did she know where he was? Did she care?

It occurred to him that he should contact her. He should write. He used his library time at the computer. There was a word processor, access to the Web, but no facility for email. He started a letter, but found he didn't know what to say. "Belated Happy Mother's Day, Mum?" Or, "Dearest Mother, I'm having a wonderful time here in prison. The company is peculiar and they like to play games with my head, but the food is good."

In the end, he gave up the task and pulled up the browser, his mind tired and wandering. A click told him he was still in the news, that Ireland was still awash in the wake of his trial, still stung by the memory of Kilhenny.

That was as it should be. Let them remember.

Click.

Security had been stepped up at schools all over Ireland and parents were reluctant to let their children board school buses.

Click.

The wife of a murdered Derry policeman made a plea for peace and the mothers of Kilhenny celebrated their first Mother's Day without their lost children.

Connor chased after other links, suddenly hungry for news of the war, of battles won and enemies bewildered.

He found news – none of it good – but he'd had a profound effect. In a wave of reaction, other members of his cell had been captured, killed. The few left had gone into hiding.

There were no glorious battles. No victory. Only treachery. They had been betrayed to the authorities by friends, by family, by each other. One had been ratted on by his own priest.

Connor got up and wandered to the magazine rack. *Sports Illustrated's* swimsuit issue was the only form of porn they allowed here, but it would do. He leafed through the magazine, thrusting his mind into steamy fantasies until it was time to return to his cell, where he lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling, trying to make erotica of his guardian water spot. He failed. It reminded him, instead, of the stains on the ceiling of his neighbourhood church, stains he'd studied from the confessional where he'd recited his trivial list of boyhood sins to Father Blaine. He'd tried to make erotica of those blots too, he recalled, but they'd insisted upon being the Virgin Mary or angels or saints.

At what point he'd slipped from waking reverie to dreamscape he didn't know, but he smelt old varnish, candle wax, and incense, heard the muttered prayers of

worshippers in the sanctuary beyond the confessional he now inhabited.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned..." And what would he confess? "Father, I have lusted after a woman in a magazine... Father, I have allowed myself to be consumed with rage... Father, I have killed."

As if he heard such things every day, Father Blaine asked: "Who have you killed and why?"

From a darkening street corner, he watched a school bus burst into riotous flame – and woke. He looked for the guardian saint or angel on the ceiling of his cell, but the shadows had shifted while he slept and she was gone.

Would he have said those words to Father Blaine if he had been sent to confessional instead of court? Why? He had acted on behalf of a Cause – the future of Ireland. He was no less a soldier of the Church than any other Crusader, and it could be said he'd made martyrs of those Protestant children. Did he need absolution for that?

— THE NINTH STATION —

You cannot do justice to the dead. When we talk about doing justice to the dead we are talking about retribution for the harm done to them. But retribution and justice are two different things.

— Lord William Shawcross

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." He sat behind a plain lattice screen in the confessional of the prison chapel, noticing that the ceiling here was scrubbed and clean. "It has been four years since my last confession."

Connor expected Father Harrison to make a comment about the length of time, but there was only silence. He continued: "I have lusted after a woman in a magazine and have committed adultery with her in my heart." It was actually under the covers of his cot, but he thought the poetic more appropriate to the confessional.

The Father said nothing.

"I have allowed myself to be consumed with futile rage." Still the Father said nothing.

"I have killed."

At last the priest spoke. "Why have you killed?"

"That Ireland might be free from oppression."

"Then these were her oppressors you killed?"

"They were the children of her oppressors! In his mind's eye, Connor saw the family of the forecourt – the washed-out man and his rock-like wife. It was hard to credit that they had ever oppressed anyone.

Again the priest was silent. Connor imagined that the silence was not without effort.

"Father, it seems to me that these children were martyrs to a Cause. And I wondered if you knew, as a man of the Church, where their souls have gone."

"Their souls?" There was unmistakable surprise in the priest's voice. "According to the doctrine of the Church Fathers, they go to Hell."

Connor sat back. He had expected the priest to say Purgatory, where souls awaited the return of their Saviour, or perhaps Limbo. He tried to recall what he had learned of these places in Confirmation class and failed.

"Why?" he asked.

"They were Protestant children, were they not?"

"And if they'd been Catholic children, they'd have gone to Heaven?"

"That would depend upon whether they had committed any sins since their last confession. At worst, they would have gone to Purgatory to await Judgment. But they were not Catholic."

"They were children. Children who died for a Cause."

"Children sin. And these children were born in the sin of apostasy."

Oddly, Liam found the idea absurd. Unjust. They were children. How much evil could they have done or even imagined in their short lives? "They might have found the Church—"

"Had they lived. But, Liam, your Cause is not the Cause of the Church."

Connor's mind recoiled from the pronouncement. A free Ireland not the Cause of the Church?

"Why did you kill?"

Connor wiped sweat from his lip. "I told you—"

"No, I mean to what end? What did result did you intend?"

A bridge out of the abyss. Connor recognized it immediately. The priest was offering absolution.

"We wanted the world to take note," Connor said. "We wanted the Brits and Sinn Féin to see that the new *status quo* was not good enough. We wanted them to realize that the fight was not over until the Brits had completely let go."

"And to that end the lives of these children were sacrificed."

"The ends justify the means."

The priest uttered something that sounded like a laugh, but could not have been. "Do you think you'll find that in the scripture?"

Connor was taken aback. Wasn't it in Proverbs? Proverbs was full of such truisms.

"Since you have time to read, you might try Machiavelli's *The Prince*. You'll find the concept there. A comforting cliché of secular politics and big business, but not an article of faith. If the Church has used it as such, it's to her shame."

There was a rustle of cloth, a creak of wood, and Father Harrison's voice fell upon him from above, like dust from the rafters. "I can't absolve you, Mr Connor. My faith isn't strong enough."

"What do you mean, you can't absolve me? You have to absolve me. You're a priest."

"You say the ends justify the means. If I were you, Mr Connor, I'd look to those ends. Go with God."

Go with God.

Connor sat frozen on the hard bench for a long moment, his mind twisting this way and that. At last he shook himself. *Look to the ends*. How could he look to what would be so long in coming? There were so few left to carry on the fight. Half his group had been wiped out in the raids and arrests following the Kilhenny bombing.

Because of the Kilhenny bombing?

He thrust the thought aside and left the confessional,

resolving not to return. The guard waiting to escort him back to his cell was a young man with smooth skin and clear blue eyes. He was a stereotype – big, muscular, silent, hard, cold. Connor found himself scrutinizing the man, looking for some sign of personhood. He found it in the wedding ring on the thick left hand. He had a wife then, and possibly children.

Connor tried to imagine him with his wife, holding hands, kissing. Balancing a child on his knee. Smiling. It was impossible.

The guard caught him looking; his gaze sharpened.

"You're a married man, I see," Connor said.

Mild surprise flared in the blue eyes. "I am."

"Children?"

"Trying. What do you care?"

"Do you hate me?"

"I suppose I do." No hesitation.

They didn't speak again and Liam returned to his cell to read the stains and shadows on its ceiling. Their meaning eluded him.

He tried again that evening to write to his mother. He finished the letter this time and had it sent. He didn't speak of sin and absolution or of causes and wars. He wished her a belated Happy Mother's Day, knowing as he framed the words that she had little to be happy about. Her only child sat in prison, hated by millions for the act that had put him there. Perhaps hating her for having borne and raised him.

— THE TENTH STATION —

Damnation is in the essence.

A damned person could be in the highest heaven:

He would still experience hell and its torments.

— Angelus Silesius

He saw his lawyer the day after his aborted confession. And before he could stop himself, he'd asked if the demonstrators were still crowding the entrance of the prison.

The lawyer showed him. There weren't as many this time, but they stood divided by the entry road and the great, looming gate house, and belief. Death to the right; life in prison to the left. The Kilhenny families were there, too, raggedly split between the two sides. The girl's family – Heather Rose's family – was on the side of life. He found that odd. The girl's mother carried a new picture with the first – a strange thing; Liam couldn't make it out.

"What's that she's got there?" he asked his lawyer.

In answer, the lawyer opened his briefcase and took out the yearbook picture of Heather Rose.

"I've seen that."

The lawyer dropped a second picture to the tabletop. It was unrecognizable, at first, then Connor realized it was a burned corpse – a skeleton wearing a tight shroud of blackened ash. A few wisps of charred hair still clung to the scalp. There were holes where the eyes had been. The teeth, not completely blackened, showed in a mummy's grin.

"They had to identify her from dental records," the

lawyer said. He scooped both the photos up again and put them back into his briefcase, as if he couldn't bear to look at them.

Connor found the image stuck with him. As surely it must stick with the mother, coming unbidden every time she closed her eyes. He raised his own eyes to the video screen; it didn't show in her face.

"You hate me, too, don't you?"

The lawyer didn't answer. He locked up his briefcase and rose. Connor noticed, for the first time, that he wore a wedding ring. A family man.

"What will happen to me?" Connor asked. "I've had their treatment. Nothing happened. They'll want to execute me, after all, won't they?"

"You'll serve out your sentence. It's as simple as that." Simple as that.

— THE ELEVENTH STATION —

Hell is oneself,
Hell is alone, the other figures in it
Merely projections. There is nothing to escape from
And nothing to escape to. One is always alone.

— T. S. Eliot

Three days after he'd written it, the letter to his mother came back to him unopened with a note paper-clipped to it. The note read: *You are mistaken. I've no son. He died as a child.*

For some time, Connor could not move. Time ceased to flow, suspending him in the realization that he was alone in the world. She'd abandoned him.

Or had he abandoned her?

He lay down on his bunk, his eyes unfocused on the ceiling. The stain was there, swimming above him. No guardian Saint now, it was only a stain. That, too, had abandoned him. He slept without meaning to. He was wary of sleep. And with good reason. Sleep took him back to the confessional – back to the vaulted sanctuary of childhood memory and adult nightmare.

"Father, forgive me, for I have sinned."

"I can't forgive you. My faith is not strong enough."

Angry, Connor stood up in the tiny booth, wanting to tear through the ornate grille-work, wanting to confront the invisible Confessor face to face. But even as he rose, the confessional shifted and blurred, grew, and filled with light.

"Sit down, Liam!" said a child's voice. "You'll get us all in trouble if you don't sit down."

Disoriented, he stared down a long row of seats, saw the faces of children turned toward him. In a moment, the bus driver would see him and he'd be in trouble. His mother said Trouble was his middle name. But she smiled when she said it, so the words warmed instead of wounding.

He slid into a seat next to a girl who smelled of roses. She smiled at him before glancing away out the window. They were drawing up to the stop, the bus was slowing. He could see a small knot of parents gathered at the corner, waiting. A woman with black-cherry hair turned from her conversation, smiled, and waved. The girl beside

him put her face to the window and waved back.

There he would not go. Before the hot flash of light, before the searing flame he knew would come, Liam Connor willed himself back to the sanctuary – back to the confessional.

This he would walk away from. He opened the door and stepped out into the rear of the sanctuary. He would walk to the doors. He would step through them. They would lead him out of the dream.

The main aisle was clotted with people; a procession pressed toward the altar. Connor had no interest in the ceremony, but at the head of the aisle, he eddied. Music, incense, and candle light surrounded him, invading his senses, and beneath his feet the flagstones felt solid and real.

He turned toward the altar, telling himself he would look away if it showed any sign of changing its shape. It was all but buried in flowers, haloed in votive light, obscured by the smoke of incense and the circle of people that stood before it. He heard the mumbles of priests, the whispered sobs of supplicants.

No, not supplicants, mourners.

Without having moved, he was at the altar, where a closed casket lay amid the flowers and candles. A photograph sat atop it. Liam had seen it before, and it made him angry that these people – his legal counsel, the doctors, the cherry-haired woman with her sad little Protestant family – so out-of-place here – could invade the sanctuary of his dreams and turn them traitor.

Was that what the Zagorsky Wave did – lay a man's dreams open to manipulation? Well, he would not co-operate.

The cherry-haired woman stood just in front of him, her hand on the lid of the coffin, her body sagging toward it. He reached out his three-fingered hand, grasped her shoulder, and turned her about. He would look into her face and tell her what he had said all along – this was war. Her child was a martyr, had died for the sake of Ireland. He opened his mouth to speak the words, but realized that the woman whose eyes poured grief into his was, in the peculiar logic of dreams, at once his mother and the girl's.

I've no son. He died as a child.

Words passed his lips; not the words he had intended. "I'm sorry."

Liam Connor awakened from his dream filled with the words. Free of sleep, comprehension dawned, clear, shining and immutable: *I am Liam Connor and this is what I did. These are the lives I touched, ravaged, destroyed. I am a nexus, a cause followed by consequence. I am a pebble dropped upon the face of a pond.*

Liam Connor awakened from his dream with the litany of enlightenment on his lips, in tenuous possession of what men and women had sought for ages, what had driven countless souls to brave untold dangers, mortify their bodies, lock themselves in monasteries with austerities he had never understood. He now wondered whether they did those things in search of enlightenment or in fear of it. Having found the object of their quest, did those ascetics cower and flagellate themselves because they fully understood ripples?

Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a

man soweth, that shall he also reap.

He'd heard and read the words without comprehension. They had been a platitude until this moment. And by them he reinterpreted his world. In the days that followed, they transformed even the most mundane of objects. The Virgin of the Water Stain was a charred corpse laid out on a stainless-steel bed. A school bus glimpsed through the trees a mile distant made him quake. He could not see a woman with a child without seeing her suddenly childless – her arms aching empty. He could not watch a television screen without seeing own his mother cloistered in her dark parlour with images of her son's handiwork parading across her face in an endless play of light and shadow.

I've no son. He died as a child.

He called the priest to hear a new confession. He had no expectation of forgiveness; confession had become habit. He said the words anyway: "Father, forgive me, for I have sinned. I've excused the murder of children as an act of war. But it wasn't an act of war, Father, it was *my* act. It destroyed families, first of all, my own. I've dishonoured my father and mother and murdered their only son. I have murdered *myself* and not known it. Father, can there be forgiveness for such things?"

There was a silence from behind the screen that stretched Connor's nerves. Then his confessor said, "I will pray God that He might forgive you."

Whatever Connor might have expected, it was not this. This was neither forgiveness nor condemnation; it was Limbo. He would gladly trade the possibility of absolution in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost for the certainty of forgiveness in the name of another human being.

But he was not to have it.

He stayed awake for 36 hours, staring at whatever was in front of him – food, a magazine, a wall. He couldn't take to his bed, for his eyes might stray to the ceiling and he feared what he would see there. So, he sat in a corner of his room, his eyes on the door, willing himself not to sleep.

Contemplating forgiveness, suspended in that ambiguous state between the dark and the dream, Liam Connor came at last to the conviction that it was not the priest's personal or vicarious pardon he must have, nor the absolution of the Holy Trinity, but the forgiveness of a different Trinity altogether.

He called for his lawyer and said, "I need forgiveness."

The lawyer seemed puzzled. "You can arrange confession—"

"I've done with confession. It's neither God nor priest I need to be forgiven by, but the Mothers. You'll bring them together for me, so I can beg their forgiveness."

"The mothers... you mean the mothers of the... the children?"

"Yes... No. I mean my mother, Heather Rose's mother, and the Holy Mother. The Mother of Christ."

The lawyer stared at him for a moment in disbelief, then said, slowly, "Liam, I'm not sure you understand what you're asking. The Holy Mother isn't... That is, she can't be..."

Connor caught himself back from the edge of the abyss and said, "Of course, I know that. What I mean is, if you

can bring the other two to the chapel, where I can beg their forgiveness before the Holy Virgin..."

"I don't know if it can be done, Liam."

Connor leaned forward across the gleaming table in the austere little room and pressed his three-fingered fist into the sanitized surface. "John, it *must* be done."

It was the first time he'd called his lawyer by his given name, and the man clearly marked it. He nodded, said he would try, and went away, leaving Connor to face another day and half of trying not to sleep or look at water stains.

— THE TWELFTH STATION —

Men are admitted into Heaven not because they have curbed and governed their passions...but because they have cultivated their understandings. ...The fool shall not enter into Heaven let him be ever so holy.

— William Blake, *A Vision of the Last Judgment*

"It was the best I could do," the lawyer told him. "I tried, I swear to you, Liam. But she's adamant. She won't come here."

"Well, why should she, then? The child she loved is dead."

John Wood shrugged as if his impeccable suit had suddenly ceased to fit him perfectly and said, "I'm sorry."

"You've no reason to be. None of this was your doing."

Connor squared his own shoulders then and walked into the chapel to meet the women that awaited him inside: one human, one divine.

She was there, sitting in the pew before the little side altar that held the effigy of the Holy Virgin. She stared up at it, her eyes on the serene face, her own face nearly touching an outstretched ceramic hand. There were two guards just beyond her, stun guns at the ready. Their eyes were fathomless, mute.

He stopped in the side aisle at the end of the pew and waited, unable to frame words.

She spoke first, her eyes never straying from the face of the Virgin. "I can't look at you," she told him. "If I look at you, I'll hate you. And I don't want to hate. *She* wouldn't want me to hate." She tilted her head to one side and candlelight burnished the cherry strands to the colour of blood.

Did she speak of the Virgin, or of Heather Rose?

"Your lawyer said you wanted forgiveness."

"Yes." The whispered word was all but lost amid the flutter of candle flames.

"What could my forgiveness possibly mean to you? I'm your enemy."

"I thought so. I was wrong. Now your forgiveness means... all." He watched her continue to gaze up at the Holy Mother, watched her face play her emotions. The two of them blurred as he watched – the human mother and the divine, the flesh and the clay – until they were one.

The human woman rose suddenly. "I forgive you. But I pray you live long enough to understand what you've done." She fled the chapel, her head down, tears spilling from eyes that had never once touched him.

I've already lived long enough.

He did not say the words aloud, but realized their utter truth in a moment of chilling epiphany. This one woman had forgiven him, but there were others who would not, his own mother among them. As to the Holy Mother, he could live a hundred years locked in this prison, visiting this chapel every day to stare up into that serene, immovable face and not know if *she* had forgiven him.

To his lawyer, he said the words he'd sworn would never would pass his lips, "I want to die."

"You didn't want to die before," the lawyer's eyes fell to the three-fingered hand that clutched the sleeve of his suit. "What changed your mind?"

"I changed my mind."

"Someone once told me that nothing is worse than death," said the lawyer softly.

Connor laughed. It wasn't yet the laughter of a madman. "Enlightenment," he said. "Enlightenment is worse than death." He met the lawyer's eyes and saw no trace of surprise, only a certain resignation.

John Wood opened his briefcase and took out a simple form. "I'll need a written statement that this is what you want and that you've come to this decision of your own will. Then the Court will assign a review committee."

"My will." Connor smiled at the fine irony of that. "I suppose it will be said the Zagorsky Wave brainwashed me into wanting to die."

The lawyer opened his mouth as if to speak, then shook his head and uncapped his pen.

Connor took the pen and poised it above the page. "Do you know what I think, John? I think there is no Zagorsky Wave. There's only a man, and the truth, and the lies he dresses it up in. The Light didn't come out of that machine."

He filled in the simple words the form called for, signed it, and handed it back to his lawyer.

— THE THIRTEENTH STATION —

Hell is where no one has anything in common with anybody else except the fact that they all hate one another and cannot get away from one another and from themselves.

— Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*

Connor appreciated the paradox: time-consuming legal moves, once welcome, were now hateful. In an eternity that must have seemed swift by judicial reckoning, a committee was appointed to visit him. He talked to them, or thought he did – perhaps he only blathered about a Trinity of Holy Mothers, and the unbearable weight of Enlightenment, and the searing horror of empathy. They listened and went away, grim-faced and silent.

A month later, the committee answered his appeal. "Next month," he was told, "you will die." They were the sweetest words he'd ever heard. He'd no desire to live in a world where an innocent curl of smoke brought nightmares or a random stain on a ceiling, condemnation.

He was executed by lethal injection. He kissed the hand of his executioner. He took the infusion with a smile, closed his eyes and gave up the ghost.

— THE FOURTEENTH STATION —

The human mind is inspired enough when it comes to inventing horrors; it is when it tries to invent a Heaven that it shows itself cloddish.

— Evelyn Waugh, *Put Out More Flags*

Liam Connor found himself engulfed in a great, golden Light. It was sunrise. It was sunset. It was glorious. It bathed him in a divine glow that reminded him of Jacob's Ladders on a clouded day and in which he could see radiant Beings descending and ascending along beams of light. They floated in brilliant auras, faces gleaming, singing as they circled the source of the glorious Light.

He'd heard of this – read about it in near-death accounts. He strained to define shape and colour, to see what Form the Divine took. Perhaps he would see Christ, or perhaps the Holy Mother. Clouds of glory danced and leapt and writhed like flame. And in the heart of the flame he saw the Form of the Divine.

A school bus.

There was Someone near him, with him or in him – he could not say which. Someone listening, waiting.

"What is this?" he begged, terrified. "Is this Hell?"

"No, this is the gateway to Heaven. This is Enlightenment."

Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff, who lives in Grass Valley, California, last appeared in *Interzone* with "White Dog" (issue 142). She is the author of several novels, and of many stories in *Analog* magazine and elsewhere.

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If recruited to join a panel at a science fiction convention on Robert A. Heinlein's predictions in the article entitled "Where To?" or "Pandora's Box," a logical person would find any convenient copy – say, a paperback edition of *Expanded Universe: The New Worlds of Robert A. Heinlein* – and bring it along. One member of such a panel at the 2002 Westercon did precisely that. But panel organizers also invited someone with a Ph.D. in English literature, and such persons may approach their assignments differently.

I knew that, unusually for a piece of Heinlein's nonfiction, the article had been published five times and that, unusually for anything by Heinlein, it had twice undergone major revisions. Its publishing history was apparently epitomized in the ragged amalgam of three versions in *Expanded Universe*, but I wanted to look at the original documents.

Soon, at the Eaton Collection at the University of California, Riverside, I was examining its first appearance in the February 1952 issue of *Galaxy*, its republication in the 1955 anthology *All About the Future*, the first revision in the 1966 collection *The Worlds of Robert A. Heinlein*, the "preview" appearance of the second revision in the Summer 1980 issue of *Destinies*, and the official debut of the second revision in *Expanded Universe* later that year. The last two versions are identical, but the others interestingly diverge, in ways both announced and unannounced. Thus, I found a story to tell, one that conveys something about Robert A. Heinlein's character and relationships with editors, but also offers lessons about the perils of authorial prophecy.

First, a textual issue to address: in 1966, Heinlein announced he was including the article in its original "unchanged" form, yet there are numerous differences between that text and the one that first appeared in *Galaxy*. As will be discussed, the differences can be logically attributed to *Galaxy* editor H.L. Gold, so one assumes Heinlein was republishing in 1966 the version he had written in 1950. Therefore, the text embedded in the 1966 version qualifies as the "original" text, while the 1952 article is the second, "corrupted" text – a sequence of dates perfectly suited to an author who delighted in time-travel paradoxes.

1950

Of course, Robert A. Heinlein was not foolish enough to spontaneously sit down and start typing some predictions; as he notes in passages added to the 1966 version, science fiction writers

The History of Heinlein's Future

Gary Westfahl

are in the business of entertainment, not prophecy. However, in the late 1940s, Heinlein was struggling to break into as many new markets as possible, and when *Cosmopolitan* approached him about writing an article about life in the year 2000, he wasn't going to turn them down.

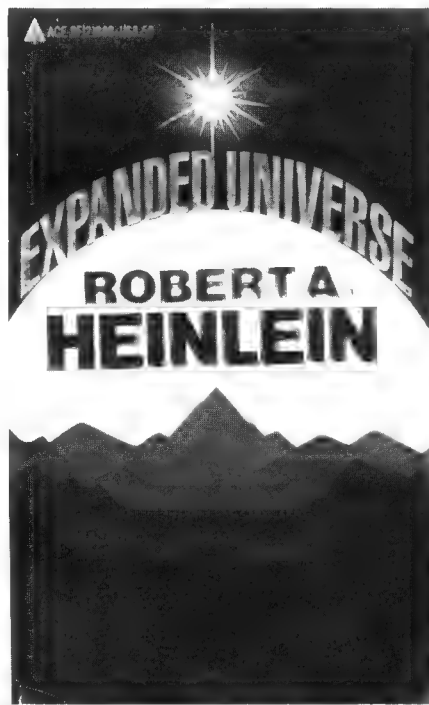
The assignment posed a dilemma for Heinlein: should he tell the pre-

sumably unadventurous female readers of *Cosmopolitan* what he *really* thought the future would be like, in all its catastrophic, mind-blowing glory, or should he provide a bland, domestic vision of tomorrow more suitable for housewives – a 1939 New York World's Fair exhibit of "the Kitchen of the Future" in prose? In a letter to his agent published in *Grumbles from the Grave*, Heinlein ponders the problem: "If *Cosmopolitan* thinks my record of accomplished predictions is good enough to warrant it, then... I'll make some serious predictions that will make their hair stand on end. If they want to play safe, I'll do an Inquiring Reporter job and we'll limit it to what the specialists are willing to say." Evidently getting no signals as to what *Cosmopolitan* preferred, he decided to play it safe and took both approaches, offering first an introductory narrative describing a mildly futuristic home of 2000, then a scattershot list of bolder prophecies representing his genuine expectations.

As usually occurs when one tries to please everyone, the resulting article qualifies as a mistake, destined to please no one: readers anxious to be transported to exotic tomorrows must endure dull portrayals of advanced household appliances before disappointingly underdeveloped glimpses of more exciting futures, while readers who were perfectly content in Mrs Middleclass's kitchen are rudely chastised for embracing such "timid" predictions. Another sign of its mixed messages was the inappropriate title he chose, "Pandora's Box," which would suggest a generally gloomy prognosis ending with a burst of optimism; yet the actual article is precisely the opposite, a mostly cheery picture of future life that lurches into the gloom-and-doom, how-to-survive-the-coming-apocalypse tone of mid-1940s Heinlein in the final paragraphs. If Heinlein had chosen one strategy and run with it, *Cosmopolitan* may have accepted the result; but they wisely rejected this self-consuming artefact, this prophecy that deconstructs itself.

1952

So, Heinlein's article fell into the hands of Gold, the editor notorious for rewriting authors' prose to deadening, disastrous effect. Yet this impression is supported almost entirely by complaints from offended writers – including Heinlein himself, who described Gold as a "copy messer-upper" after observing his handiwork on *The Puppet Masters* and extracted a promise from Gold to henceforth leave Heinlein's prose "involute." But writers



can be unduly sensitive about editorial alterations (hello, David and Paul!). In the case of "Where To?," we have copies of a text Before Gold and After Gold, enabling us to judge the merits of his editing for ourselves.

One can garner evidence that Gold, charmingly labelled a "run-of-the-mill hack" by Heinlein, indeed had a tin ear for prose style. Even after infuriating his prize contributor, Gold could not resist making minor changes: Heinlein's "when you have sniffed at her for not doing so" became "when you have *disapproved of her not doing so*," and Heinlein's "they offer us hope in every other field" becomes "they offer us *impetus* to every other field." Gold also had the irksome habit of adding unnecessary explanations and qualifications, weighing down Heinlein's crisp declarations with pedestrian clutter. Consider these Heinlein predictions, with Gold's additions italicized:

Interplanetary travel is waiting at your front door – C.O.D. It's yours when you pay for it, *which the government is doing at least on an experimental basis*.

Beef will be a luxury; lamb and mutton will disappear, *because sheep destroy grazing land*.

In fifteen years the housing shortage will be solved by a "breakthrough" into new technology which will make every house now standing as obsolete as privies. *The housing shortage will get worse until then*.

Does anyone find these additions salutary? But my favourite example of Gold's inept tinkering has to be:

Intelligent life of *some sort* will be found on Mars –

this presumably to cover Heinlein's bet in case, say, the equivalents of chimpanzees are discovered on Mars.

There was also one act of outrageous editorial interference: to Heinlein's list of "things we *won't* get soon, if ever," Gold adds an item of his own:

Control of telepathy and other E.S.P. phenomena.

Gold is working in a dig at editorial competitor John W. Campbell, Jr., then vigorously promoting "psi" powers in every issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*; yet doing so by adding language to another writer's article (particularly one who was reasonably open-minded regarding the prospects of harnessing psychic powers) seems beyond the pale.

Still, there were virtues in Gold's rendering of Heinlein. Considering the

predominantly male readership of *Galaxy*, he properly edits passages too clearly aimed at female readers, removing the sentence where the reader is addressed as "Duchess" and revising a paragraph about the desire of "a woman" for an improved appearance to consistently refer to "a man or a woman." One also develops an appreciation for his blue pencil when it is simply used to cross sentences out. Heinlein's concluding paragraphs, as he desperately seeks a cohesive ending to this incohesive article, are all over the map – earnest, flippant, despairing, chipper – and Gold shrewdly omits some of the most discordant sentences.

When Heinlein attempts to get serious about the chances for future war, it hardly helps to exclaim parenthetically, "It might even end with a war with Mars, God save the mark!" When Heinlein waxes poetic about the stormy days ahead, he falls flat: "Today the clouds obscure the sky and the wind that overturns the world is sighing in the distance." When Heinlein seeks to belatedly justify his title, he struggles to achieve eloquence: "The last thing to come fluttering out of Pandora's box was hope – without which men die." Gold deleted these sentences, and even if he was primarily trying to keep the article from bleeding on to another page, their absence is welcome.

Further, Heinlein ends the article abruptly: "Long after the first star ship leaves for parts unknown, there will still be outhouses in upstate New York, there will still be steers in Texas, and – no doubt – the English will still stop for tea." I can't speak for every reader, but this doesn't sound much like a conclusion to me. Gold recognizes the problem and adds a final, two-word paragraph: "Stick around" – not a scintillating conclusion, but better than no conclusions at all.

Overall, Gold may not be much of a writer, but considered as an *editor* – defined as someone who shortens and shapes others' prose – he does pretty well with a flawed piece of writing. Purists will scream, but given the choice of which version of the article to republish, I'd choose Gold's version every time.

1955

When "Where To?" reappeared in *All About the Future*, it didn't change much – editors of anthologies rarely change much – except for a word added here and punctuation altered there. Yet one thing is worth mentioning. *Galaxy* accidentally inverted two passages at the start of Heinlein's list, so the text jumps from the middle of

his introductory "axiom" – "A 'nine-day wonder' is taken as a matter of course on the tenth day" – to the middle of the second prediction and continues until, in the middle of the fifth prediction, the first axiom resumes. Since Gold ended the fifth item with "The housing shortage will get worse until then," the result was to accidentally create the sentence, "The housing is taken as a matter of course on the tenth day." Yet readers can see something is amiss with the text and figure out what went wrong. In the 1955 version, the problem of the juxtaposed passages is entirely corrected – except the new sentence is retained to conclude the fifth item, with no surrounding material to suggest an error has occurred.

Thus, a new prediction has been inadvertently but unambiguously placed in Heinlein's mouth, that a new system of house-building will enable a person to order a new house and obtain it ten days later – precisely the sort of revolutionary "breakthrough" in mass-produced housing that he had in mind.

1966

In 1965, realizing he had just enough uncollected stories for one more collection, Heinlein was planning *The Worlds of Robert A. Heinlein* with Donald A. Wollheim of Ace Books, who requested an updated version of "Where To?" Still attentive to editorial requests at this stage in his career, Heinlein agreed, but recognized that the original article was essentially beyond repair. Instead, he opted to republish his manuscript in its original form – on the stated grounds that he did not wish to "conceal my bloopers" – and surrounded it with new passages contextualizing and revisiting his original predictions. Also, by mentioning all the stories in the collection, the expanded piece could do double-duty as the introduction.

Still angry about Gold's justifiable decision to retitle the article "Where To?", Heinlein revives "Pandora's Box" as the lengthened version's title and defiantly begins and ends the wrap-around material with new references to Pandora's Box, though it is still dysfunctional as a unifying theme. After discussing predictions in relation to his stories, he segues into the original article, explaining that "a science fiction writer should avoid marihuana, prophecy, and time payments – but I was tempted by a soft rustle." (Of paper money? Of the skirts of *Cosmopolitan's* female readers?) Later, he adds endnotes to 13 of the original 19 predictions as well as some final remarks, including his famous declaration that "Man... is mean, ornery,

cantankerous, illogical, emotional – and amazingly hard to kill.”

Heinlein's new comments are generally calm, if sometimes grouchy, but an ominous note emerges when he explains why a prediction of new house-building techniques proved incorrect: “I underestimated (through wishful thinking) the power of human stupidity – a fault fatal to prophecy.” It is as if Heinlein was adding, after the fact, a qualification to the original predictions: “these things will come true *if people are as intelligent and enlightened as I am.*” But genuine prophecy must take into account human resistance to change, economic realities, and similar factors, and inaccurate prognosticators cannot explain away their failures by complaining that citizens simply weren't farsighted and judicious enough to do what they should have done.

The larger problem is that the premise underlying the original article – that one properly extrapolates the future of humanity as a rising parabola leading to ever-accelerating scientific and social progress – isn't valid. Throughout history, the curves of human advancement have unpredictably risen, flattened, and fallen, and if we haven't quite maintained the pace of the first half of the 20th century, that doesn't necessarily mean that humanity has suddenly fallen into ignorance, irresponsibility, and depravity. But I anticipate the argument that emerges more clearly in the 1980 version of Heinlein's article.

1980

By the late 1970s, there was a new editor at Ace Books, Jim Baen, eager to assemble a new, larger version of *The Worlds of Robert A. Heinlein*. Far from seeking to edit Heinlein's prose, Baen wanted as much of it as he could possibly get – so much so that he recorded long phone conversations with the Great Man and transcribed the results to serve as lengthy introductions and afterwords to pieces in the collection. The equally voluminous additions to “Pandora's Box,” however, seem more a product of Heinlein's typewriter than his voice.

Readers are again assured that the language of “Where To?” was reproduced exactly as originally written, and one would assume the material added for “Pandora's Box” was also reproduced exactly as written. But it wasn't, though most changes involve trivial matters of spelling, punctuation and capitalization. Language referring to times of composition, potentially confusing in a piece combining prose from three different eras, is reworked for clarity; an awkward

1950 phrase – “nor is the pool chill” – is revised to “and the pool is not chilly”; a 1965 sentence praising Frank Herbert's *Dune* is removed.

A few changes, however, interestingly reflect a punctilious concern for the niceties of English grammar. A rhetorical flourish from 1950 – “there will be no security anywhere, save what you dig out of your own inner spirit” – is revised to the more formal “save *that which* you dig out.” “Just,” criticized as a superfluous, slangy qualifier, is removed from the 1965 comment, “I'll hedge number eighteen just a little.” A parenthetical “hopefully” in 1965, improperly used to mean “I hope,” is changed to “I hope!” Elsewhere in *Expanded Universe*, Heinlein offers a lengthy condemnation of the appalling writing skills of students at the University of California; he can hardly allow himself to be observed writing in any manner not sanctioned by the highest authorities.

More conspicuous, of course, are huge chunks of new prose preceded by “1980” and, unlike the 1965 additions, shoved right into the middle of the article (where the 1965 additions are also relocated). (There is also an added “poem,” entitled “Where To?,” combining lines about the sparrow building a nest in the spout with heavy-handed complaints about building inspectors.) This time, Heinlein adds commentaries to all 19 predictions, and if anyone is keeping score, Heinlein seems to be gloating about four or five predictions that were coming true while feeling a need to explain why he has not been vindicated in other cases. (In 2002, the scoring would be more generous – seven out of 19 correct.) With these lengthy interruptions, sometimes several pages in length, the limited charm of the original article is all but dissipated.

In an especially annoying passage, Heinlein addresses the problem of humanity's failure to explore the solar system as he projected. This is ridiculous, he asserts; why, all we need is a spaceship with constant acceleration, and we could travel anywhere in the solar system in weeks, if not days. This is an accurate but not especially helpful observation, given the technological and economic difficulties of constructing such spaceships – not unlike saying, “If scientists would just figure out how to make pixie dust, we could all fly to Mars without spaceships.” Yet it remains a suggestive observation that an advocate of space exploration might defensibly present.

Heinlein is not content to merely present the observation. He orders readers to pick up their calculators; he tells them what formulas to employ and which figures to insert; he insists

that they punch out the calculations *themselves*, to be persuaded *beyond any doubt* that Heinlein is correct; and in case they make any mistakes, he provides the answers in a later section of the book. Heinlein has become the person we all wish to avoid at parties, who corners victims and browbeats them on some point until they meekly acknowledge he is completely correct.

Reading such diatribes, it becomes painfully clear why writers should not try to predict the future:

- 1) You will probably be dead wrong;
- 2) You will then feel obliged to explain why you were wrong; and
- 3) Given the choice of saying either “I was stupid” or “The whole world was stupid,” you are lamentably likely to opt for the latter explanation, which is questionable and unpersuasive but less destructive to your ego.

That is, acknowledging our largely suspended conquest of space, Heinlein theoretically might have said, “I predicted that in 2000 couples would stroll along the beach watching the first interstellar starship leave Earth orbit; J.G. Ballard predicted that in 2000 couples would stroll along the beach staring at rusting remnants of abandoned rockets; and I must admit that I was wrong and Ballard was right.” Yet it would be difficult to say such things, and it's only to be expected that Heinlein would instead argue that our unforeseen lack of progress is an anomaly created by political idiocy and bureaucratic shortsightedness.

There is another lesson here for professional writers: do not always write what editors ask you to write, and do not always publish what you have written. Tempted by *Cosmopolitan*, Heinlein devoted considerable time to researching and writing an article he knew he shouldn't have attempted, and on two later occasions he devoted considerable time to efforts to revise and improve the defective product of his labours – time he might have spent writing new stories more worthy of analysis. Clearly, Heinlein would have been better off if he had never written “Where To?,” or if he had never published it. Every time he bothered with it, he lost his way, straying from his strengths into profitless fidgeting.

Now, as the world begins the process of deciding which Heinlein works to remember and which ones to forget, “Where To?”/“Pandora's Box” is manifestly destined for the latter list, to be read only by future scholars with an obsessive interest in the minutiae of 20th-century science fiction. And that is the only prediction of the future that I care to make.

Gary Westfahl



All Good

All the

Time =

OR

The End of Everything?

MEDIA COMMENTARY WITH EVELYN LEWES

Science fiction is important! Events and people have combined recently to lead me to begin to believe the opposite, what with *Babylon Tripe* being repeated yet again (on *Bravo*, at two a.m. on Sunday morning or something like), and *Fartspace* winning multiple awards while persons whose intellect I otherwise respect express the opinion, "it's only a show," and I very nearly finally accepted this point of view when I went into the local branch of MVC last week looking for some quality music (Iris DeMent and John Prine, if you must know) and found an entire science-fiction section of DVDs against the back wall of the store. On the left of the display were sf movies, and on the right were sf television programmes, and across the middle, making a cross, was a display of the Orion sf and fantasy classic line of books marked "two for ten pounds." The books were, needless to say, the highest quality sf represented there by far. I don't say there was no good visual sf; among the paranoia and pixies of *X-Viles* and the naïvety of *Time Tunnel*-lookalike *Barf-gate* the discerning customer could find DVDs already firmly ensconced in our collection – the collector's editions of *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, and even *The Tomorrow People* and *Tripods* – but there was nothing new there to tempt the palate. It remains a mystery to me why, apart

from a couple of expensive collector's edition tapes and the solitary DVD release of series six, *Third Rock from the Sun* has never been released on tape or DVD. It is one of the very few things I would happily have bought on tape before I ever considered buying a DVD player. *Andromeda* is resplendent in its collector's matched edition boxes; even the bizarre and compulsive, but ever disappointingly empty, *Lexx* is available for the undiscerning viewer to waste money on. But where might I find a DVD that I could quietly wear out watching *Dark Angel*? Or *Earth: Final Conflict* (but only the first series of both)? I eschewed recording these on video – video tape can only disappoint when I want the superior quality of picture that comes with DVD in the widescreen versions (without the edges chopped off) that *Sky One* have so signally failed to broadcast. I might even have considered buying some classic episodes of *The Hunger* or recent *Twilight Zone*, there is such a dearth of stuff worth watching being broadcast at the moment, but even these were absent.

Three months ago I started to write a piece for this column that was to be entitled *The End of Everything*. I was at once despondent and exhilarated. *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* had just come to a triumphal conclusion, and I felt able to write about it straight away without fear of spoiling it for you

as the *Radio Times*, a far more august journal, had seen fit to reveal the story line in a write-up of the fact that *Sky One* was going to be showing the entire *Buffy* series nightly over the next few months. I was going to thrill over how Xander, increasingly obviously the only remaining human among all these supernatural practitioners, was in fact the key to the story, and for the first time in the *Buffy*-verse the glorious zenith of the story-telling took place while *Buffy* was trapped in a pit on the other side of town sister-bonding with Daaahn as they fought off earth-monster skeletons with any sword that came to hand. I was going to babble on ineffectually about how it had been necessary to move the focus of the show away from *Buffy* as it was coming to the end of its franchised run and they needed to position the characters so they could have individual lives as need be; about what a stroke of genius it was on the part of Joss Whedon to make that move to a character who, as far as can be ascertained, is not going to go forward into a different series (unless Roz Kaveney's clever theory about the reverse pollination from *Angel* to *Buffy* will indeed give Daaahn a series of her own and Xander continues there) – but he is beginning to look a bit too fat and beer-raddled to be a credible lead hunky boy in a teen-fest, which is

plainly what such a Daaahn-spin-off would have to be.

I was also going to be desolate about my other two favourites. *Earth: Final Conflict* has spun so wildly away from its original remit that it is hard to recognize the same programme, never mind the characters. Having overcome both the Taelon menace and the menace from the Taelon's enemies, the producers have now introduced even more improbable aliens with even more improbable designs on Earth. It looks as wonderful as ever, but the storylines have become risible, and that is unforgivable in a science-fiction show. To me, the storyline is the expression of the idea, and the idea is all important.

My other favourite of the moment, *Dark Angel*, suffered a merciful termination, much though I was still enjoying it, even in its enfeebled search-for-ratings state. I was going to say what a shame this was, that another really good idea had been bowdlerized and diluted and defrayed and dissipated into the generic search for ratings where before it had had the capability to command attention solely with its ground-breaking originality. The first series of *Dark Angel* is one of the best pieces of television science fiction that I have ever seen. Exploring the landscape of a near-future post-industrial-and-economic-collapse America while discovering the back history allied with the emotional growth of one of the genetically-engineered soldiers it had produced, all the while accentuating the affecting aspects of the "ordinary" humans that surrounded her everyday was a brilliant idea. Seeing them traduced into parodies of themselves, seeing the pathetic attempt to shadow the events of *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* – she and her lover can't ever touch because if they do it will be the worse for him – say it with me... "puh-lease" – and particularly seeing the unexplained departure of my favourite second-string character, Herbal – I will carry with me forever his incantation, in that wonderful Trinidadian accent, "It's aaall good, aaall de time" – I wanted to fulminate in this column about how good science-fictional ideas were being abandoned in the search for mere audience approval. Of course, there were also good introductions – Max's soulmate Joshua, half-man, half-dog, was a sublime creation and he deserves his own spin-off kennel, but the other side of the coin, the war between the humans and the mutants, which is where the storyline appeared to be leading, with its endless possibilities for little tales told in the big scenario and never an end in sight (as appears to have happened with *Earth: Final Conflict*) is simply a recipe in equal parts for

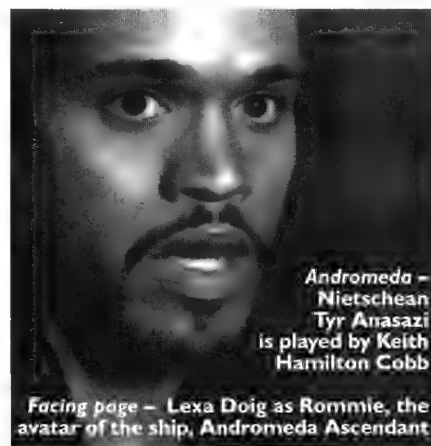


Dark Angel – Herbal

soap-opera and disaster, and I for one, and with much regret, applaud the decision to end *Dark Angel*, if the only alternative was to watch it descend into equal depths of inanity.

But I can't say any of these things, because time has moved on and more important subjects have emerged. *Enterprise* came to a not-altogether-surprisingly vapid ending (astonishing to hear its theme, the hymn-to-vague-aspiration, sung at the beginning of the Commonwealth Games – surely they would have been better off with the March of the High Guard from *Andromeda*, where at least they are committed to restoring the Commonwealth), and I was so moved to commentary that I almost forgot to mention it here. And I heard that Joss Whedon was (and is) delayed in producing the final installment of the comic *Fray* (about a slayer in the future) by his involvement in finishing off the *Buffy* and *Angel* series and putting together a new science-fiction series called *Firefly*. Of a sudden I see the real reason that *Dark Angel* was cancelled – plainly, the networks would rather have a science-fictional *Buffy* from the master than the insipid, idea-free *Buffy*-shadow that *Dark Angel* was threatening to become.

Joss Whedon is "the man" at the moment. Let's stand back and take a



Andromeda –
Nietschean
Tyr Anasazi
is played by Keith
Hamilton Cobb

Facing page – Lexa Doig as Rommie, the avatar of the ship, *Andromeda Ascendant*

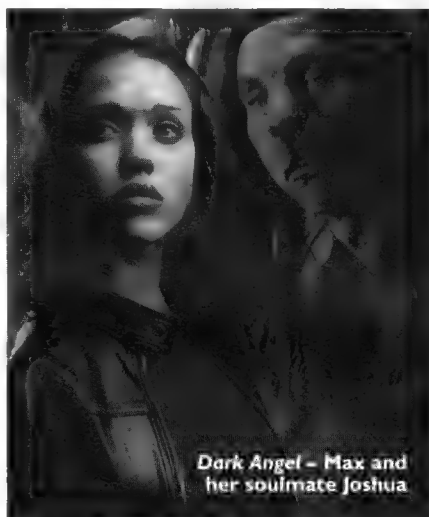
look at his achievements. He has successfully taken a half-assed idea about a high-school girl being a supernatural remedy for vampires, made a movie out of it, and then sold that on to television and created a stunning piece of televisual art. Not content with turning over expectations willy-nilly, so much so that we now expect the waif in the alley to turn on the threatening predator, and are surprised if she does get murdered, he painted himself into a corner with his storyline, and then to solve the problem went looking for new genres and new expectations to overturn. As a result, he created an early masterpiece of 21st-century television in the all-singing all-dancing musical episode "One More Time With Feeling." Plainly, *Buffy* could not tell the Scooby gang, who had conspired so loyally to bring her back to life again, how betrayed she felt by their actions, and it would have been impossibly naff to do it as some kind of confessional heart-to-heart, or a straight-to-camera soliloquy that her friends overheard, so Whedon simply took the one popular form that still allowed you to say what you feel out loud – the musical – infected *Sunnydale* with it, and gave *Buffy* her soliloquy, even more stunningly duetted later with Spike, where she could confess all and still maintain her So-Cal cool.

After that, and the riveting finale to the series where, as mentioned above, Xander's simple humanity comes into its own in contrast to Willow becoming all-powerful and quite terrifying, it was a tremendous let-down to have nothing to look forward to all summer. But then came the third series of *Andromeda*. I've said before that *Andromeda* appears to be the true continuation of *Star Trek*, in that where *Star Trek: The Next Generation* moved the action forward a couple of hundred years, what was needed next was to move the action forward a couple of thousand years. It would have been Roddenberry's vision to see a machine as powerful as the starship *Andromeda Ascendant*, even if it was now a warship, being salvaged from temporal stasis in the gravity field of a wormhole and utilized in an apparently futile idealistic dream to re-establish the Commonwealth (read Federation) that had fallen when the ship had become frozen in time.

What Roddenberry could not have foreseen, however, were the events of September 11, 2001. America suddenly stood in need of having its backbone stiffened, in need of new young men to recruit into its armed forces to go out and implement its policies in strange and foreign lands all around the world. Admirably, *Enterprise* seems largely to have avoided annexa-

tion to this purpose (despite the farcical Bush-and-Blair, Austin-v-Islington double-act of the two supporting lead actors), and the vision of the *Enterprise* going boldly and peacefully about its business unless threatened is still holding, although I was somewhat disturbed in the season finale to see a whole world of people blown up, but the people on *Enterprise*, having been suitably horrified, then rested their consciences on discovering it wasn't their fault after all. But the "boldly and peacefully" attitude is a fragile thing, easily transmogrified into "arrogantly and well-enough armed to face down any opposition," and I have watched with increasing horror in past weeks as *Andromeda* has slipped over into a kind of latter-day *Space: Above and Beyond*. First of all, the cast has been homogenized – Trance Gemini lost her tail, and then transformed into her own future self, so has a much more mature and human persona; and Rev Bem, the resident scary hairy monster monk has been lost (on extended vacation or something) so that the crew is now made up of recognizably blue-eyed enhanced metahumans. Then, two weeks ago, a giant space creature was due back on its 200-year cycle to take a bite out of a planet that had now been colonized by humans (no, this is not *Lexx*, although I did boggle at this similarity), and Captain Dylan Hunt set his jaw and committed himself to saving the planet or destroying himself and the *Andromeda* in the process. That *Andromeda* was swallowed and began to be digested was not in the least surprising; what astonished me was that although they did try hailing the creature a couple of times, finally, they settled on simply blowing it to smithereens, which they did, and looked thoroughly smug about it too. Whatever happened to Roddenberry's vision, oft restated in even recent *Trek* episodes, "to seek out new life"? It's not that they blew the thing up that worries me; it's that they showed no remorse.

Last week it got worse. It had come to our hero's notice that 200 high guard ships roughly equivalent to *Andromeda Ascendant* herself, complete with equally personable artificial intelligences, had been taken prisoner by the Nietzscheans and were being kept in a "prison camp" orbiting a star they couldn't escape. The Nietzscheans had failed thus far to subdue or suborn them, and Dylan's news is that the Nietzscheans have finally found a way of wiping the AIs so they can install their own and take the ships over – either that or destroy them. The story itself is almost unrelenting twaddle, with its entirely artificially introduced deadline, and apparently



Dark Angel – Max and her soulmate Joshua

mutinous AIs who want to be consulted about command decisions. There is lots of shouting of "Soldier" and "Dooty" and I was appalled to see what appeared to be an episode of *Space: Above and Beyond* being acted out almost entirely by spaceships, AIs, and their avatars. Lots of exploding spaceships, to be sure, which is my own mark of a good sci-fi yarn, but by golly the hawkish nature of this story stuck in my craw.

So this week, when Tyr Anasazi, the resident Nietzschean, persuades Dylan to go off and help the Orca pride of which his wife is a member, I wondered if we might be getting back to more usual sci-fi soap opera, but no, they are in danger from a group of aggressively ordinary human beings who want to wipe out all enhanced human beings and return racial purity to the human race. In the course of the show, the Orca pride is wiped out, but not before Tia discovers he has a son who is the Nietzschean messiah and who he claims has been killed in order that he be allowed to live on and become a threat in a future series.

I'm not going to labour the parallels between the events of last September and the events of these past few episodes, nor the uncanny resemblance to a classic of science fiction that appears to be all about Arabs, *Dune*, but from their evidence I have to express profound concern about the message that Gene Roddenberry's original vision is being perverted to serve. Roddenberry, humanist that he was, and xenophile by nature and political leaning, would have been appalled by this. So should we all be. But the most profound lesson is this: the people who make these programmes have our dreams in their hands, and they feel they have the right and the power to twist them to their own ends. They believe that this science fiction stuff is important to its audience, and can thus be used as a vehicle for their political ends. And I

say they are partly right. Science fiction is important. But it is too important to let them drag it down into their squalid little ideological war. Roddenberry stood tall and proud and independent, and gazed above these things. Some of my fondest memories are of how the original *Star Trek* displayed such things as ridiculous – who could forget the classic episode "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield," where two men whose faces are half black, half white leave Kirk exasperated at not being able to see how they could distinguish between one another until one points out that he is black on the left and white on the right, while the other is black on the right and white on the left. It transpires they are the only two individuals from their planet still alive – their races have wiped one another out while these two have been away – and they are left at the last on their home planet, still fighting over their imagined differences among the ruins.

I find it even more extraordinary that each week *Sky One* are following the *Andromeda* episode with a classic episode from the *Star Trek* canon – we have had Jean-Luc become a Borg, Spock hurling the Plomeek soup, and Lwaxana Troi bringing Mr Hom to the wedding of Deanna. Tonight, "The Trouble with Tribbles" followed *Andromeda's* encounter with human fundamentalist genocides, and I was left gasping in the face of this gross irony. What is happening in *Andromeda* is far more worrying to me than any of the sabre-rattling we hear on the news. *Andromeda* is becoming a propaganda weapon in the build-up to a seriously unfriendly future that is beginning to resemble what was depicted in *Dark Angel*, and it feels wrong. Science fiction is important! If it weren't, then these people wouldn't be attempting to traduce it into serving their narrow military agenda. I tremble at the thought of what clarion call might be due for broadcast to us all next week in the series finale, and only live in hope that it is sufficiently poorly done that the propaganda will show through. I would never have worried about *Twaddle-On 5* being thus perverted; no one could ever have taken anything seriously that was peddled by that crew of wooden indians. But in some ways *Andromeda* has matured, and appears to have developed a following that might be impressionable; we can only hope they are intelligent and perceptive too, and that the messages that are being embedded in their favourite show of the moment will be ignored in favour of the much more important implication that that embedding recognizes – that it is the science fiction itself that is important!

Evelyn Lewes

The Straw Men (HarperCollins, £10) is "Michael Marshall's" first novel and Michael Marshall Smith's fourth. The dropped "Smith" was supposedly occasioned by the recent publication of a thriller bearing the same title and written by one Martin Smith, but this device also pits the wildly inventive sf/fantasy work of MMS against the wildly inventive dark-thriller writing of MM. Common themes, preoccupations and tones that emerge across *Only Forward* (1994), *Spares* (1996) and *One of Us* (1998) remain centrally present in *The Straw Men*. Whether being marketed as Smith or not, and whether writing as Smith or not, this is genre fiction that can't be contained by the districts of sf/fantasy/crime/mystery or by the leafy suburbs of sub-genre. Smith and his not-Smith doppelgänger consistently, characteristically, mess with our cartographies of genre.

Despite the fact that it suggests an irritatingly neat parallel, I feel that *The Straw Men* is Michael Marshall's *Only Forward*. First novels published under each moniker, yes, but they are twinned by so much more: a pervasive miasma of guilt, an interest in real estate and the neighbourhood, and a sense of maddening conspiracy crowding in on their protagonists. *Only Forward* recently received the accolade of being reprinted as part of the Voyager Classics sf/fantasy range — not bad going for a novel first published as a paperback original less than ten years ago, and one can only imagine that *The Straw Men* is likewise destined for the status of immediate classic.

The Straw Men's radical originality lies in taking the motif of horror-thriller writing over the past 20 years — the serial killer — turning it on its head, and then stomping on it for quite a while just for good measure. The novel's cover tagline gives a fair sense of the rhythmic sarcasm and comedic bleakness carried within its pages when it proclaims: "Friends. Neighbours. Serial killers." These insistent plurals give away just enough of the game: rather than dealing with the serial-killer sub-genre as a bastion of damaged and extraordinary individuality, the rules are different here. The killer as psycho-"genius," an idea pushed onward by the likes of Thomas Harris, is given a sharply communal twist by Marshall.

A killing collective may be in operation behind the scenes of American small-town life and elsewhere, but if so, what is their agenda? Something that initially looks like a single case of serial killing that can be profiled soon becomes something far stranger. But it isn't only Marshall's multiple killers who are themselves multiplied: a novel of this sort needs a minimum of one

Wordsmith of Wonder – Minus the "Smith"

Matt Hills

charismatic, renegade, hyper-intuitive investigator, and preferably a handful. *The Straw Men* offers us John Zandt, former homicide detective, and his FBI ex-lover, described as "very Dana Scully" in her attire, if not in other ways. Zandt is tracking a killer, labelled "The Upright Man," who specializes in abducting teenage girls from well-to-do families. Raising the stakes, Zandt's involvement is both unofficial and personal: his own daughter was taken by the Upright Man, and has never been found.

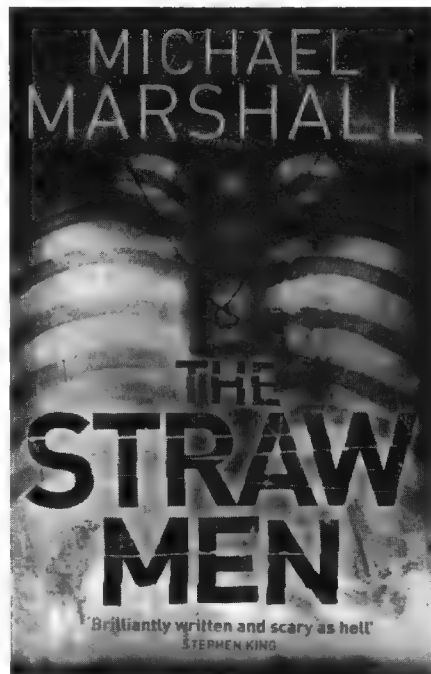
This warped police-procedural plot is woven into a very different sub-generic strand: that of the "innocent" caught up in extraordinary circumstances. As well as focusing on a crime investiga-

tion, *The Straw Men* also deals with the tale of Ward Hopkins. Ward isn't a professional taking care of procedure. Despite an unusual background, he's largely presented as a flawed Everyman struggling with vast conspiratorial forces outside his control, and seeking to understand the puzzle of his own identity in the wake of his parents' sudden deaths. And if *they* weren't who he thought they were all his life, then who the hell is he? Ward's predicament may be a contemporary, "realist" one cast in the light of thriller conventions, but it nevertheless captures a facet of sf's concern with questioning identity and "the familiar." When Ward's entire life history and sense of self are abruptly rendered alien, then he has no choice other than to delve into his parents' pasts. Marshall uses this plotline in an intriguing way, since despite never becoming outright sf or horror, it is coloured by the generic sentiments of both, carrying a sense of awe inspired by the loss of a man's moorings in the world, a sense of dismayed wonder at the new pattern that gradually emerges, and a sense of monstrosity that is held not-quite-successfully at bay outside the self.

That MM(S) can so readily draw on the structures of feeling characteristic of sf and horror without entirely straying into their domains indicates, perhaps, that definitions of sf that strive to cover more than space opera will inevitably produce blurred edges and grey areas. And it is these fuzzy not-quite-spaces that *The Straw Men* inhabits. Like Smith's earlier work it exists on a different page to any imaginable Venn diagram of genres, depicting a world where the safe classifications of the everyday threaten to dissolve into uncanny machinations.



REVIEWED



It shares an approach to monstrosity with the horror genre, given that monstrosity is the term and topic that links serial-killer fiction most directly into horror, as human monsters and evils are substituted for supernatural threats, and as the "ordinary killer next door" supplants the extraordinary and world-shattering ghost, vampire or werewolf.

By making evil ordinary and everyday, serial-killer fiction seems to suggest that our traditional moral co-ordinates are obsolete. But it usually does this while elevating the serial killer into a perfect psychological case study, complete with a repetition-compulsion-turned-*modus operandi*, and a completely, transparently knowable story of self. The killer is thus elusively "ordinary" (he could be anyone) and psychologically "extraordinary" (his life story is wholly knowable and unique). The killer's actions are at the same time totally determined, as a story repeated over and over again, and totally individual, as an idiosyncratic and taboo-breaking realization of self. Perhaps the attraction of fictional serial killers is that they have the worst morals but the best stories. *The Straw Men* allows its leading serial killer just this contrapuntal extraordinary/ordinary status — his *modus operandi* emerges from a single, telling detail, and his extreme ordinariness is such that he can blend into crowds, lurk in video footage, and remain unseen while going about his business.

Michael Marshall has digested his Stephen King and Jim Thompson, read his Michael Connelly and Thomas Harris — all authors whose books appear, by way of homage as much as character delineation, on one investigator's bookshelf (p248). And in the name of research, Marshall has no doubt scanned a good few academic studies of serial killers. Given that the philosopher of Being, Martin Heidegger, and an anthropologist of media and modernity, Marc Augé, are quoted at the start of the book and at the beginning of its final part, MM(S) is evidently not adverse to mixing academic work and genre fiction. Dealing self-consciously with the philosophy of serial-killer fiction, rather than clumsily making itself "philosophical," *The Straw Men* reads like a dream while twisting utterly nightmarish images into your head. It filters the characteristics and notion of the serial killer through Marshall's jaggedly humorous and cynical perspective, finally throwing away in an aside (p371) the crucial detail that underpins the Upright Man's behavioural pattern, and producing a serial-killer manifesto of sorts that pushes the envelope of organized crime. As in *One of Us*, individual crimes and their repercussions in per-

sonal life are written into larger frameworks of social organization and systems of thought. If Marshall's previous novel, as MMS, can be thought of as his most transparently "theological" conceit, then this is his most directly anthropological, with *Only Forward* taking its primary cues from an acid-noir travesty of business studies, and *Spares* obviously leaning on almost-imagined developments in biotechnology.

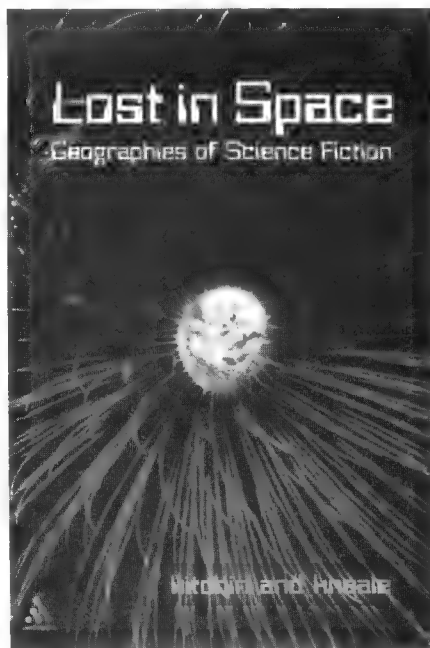
While many links can be seen across MM(S)'s developing oeuvre, ranging from the darkest of his "miserabilist" short stories through to the urban phantasmagoria of his novels, it is my suggested comparison of *The Straw Men* and *Only Forward* that I want to return to here. Both seem most clearly to revisit and rework the narrative template of an investigator who uncovers or embraces his own criminality/guilt. A cliché by now, perhaps, this challenge to "detective-versus-criminal" fiction has been exacerbated in the serial-killer sub-genre. Psychos and SOCOs are often assumed to mirror one another's existential guilt. Even if the self-as-criminal-to-be-discovered narrative has been mined more heavily of late, suggesting a partial breakdown in the fictional separation of good and evil, this device is used in specific ways in *Only Forward* and *The Straw Men*. In its more obviously fantastic guise, it becomes a matter of imagined others who are parts and projections of the self: a matter of environments like *Only Forward*'s Jeamland that are neither wholly outer nor inner space, neither space opera nor new wave, but a kind of surreal objectivism uniquely suited to the literature of fantasy. In its less fantastic, thriller guise, this reworking of the whodunnit? as I-dunnit! is dressed in different garb, becoming a

matter of uncanny realism. This provokes a sense that even without the devices of fantasy, the self cannot be as readily contained and controlled as we might all like to believe. Confronted by life-or-death choices, or moments of love-or-loss decisiveness, we are not always who or where we think we are. In fact we may seem, to others, to be guilty of making the wrong choice. Of letting love walk away. Of failing to act. And if enough other people believe that, then what value does our protested innocence have?

The Straw Men shares a range of thematic preoccupations with *Only Forward*, and another is the function of space. In a recent foreword, written for a collection of academic essays entitled *Lost in Space: Geographies of Science Fiction* (edited by Rob Kitchin and James Kneale; Continuum, £16.99), Michael Marshall Smith reflects on the spatial awareness of his sf/fantasy novels:

"I understood this intellectually, but it was only recently, and with a degree of surprise, that I realized just how key both geographical and architectural concerns are to the fiction that I myself write. Certainly, I was aware that one novel [*Only Forward*] concerned a compartmentalized city, in which cultural and social division were exaggeratedly concretized; and that another [*Spares*] was centred on a flying expression of socio-economic difference... But I realized this largely in retrospect, and believe these features arose primarily out of the simple activity of trying to tell human stories, within a genre which is open to the imagined and the unreal."

This statement can be taken to challenge the genre and brand separation of "Michael Marshall Smith" and "Michael Marshall," since the spatial themes so prevalent in MMS's sf/fantasy novels are writ large in *The Straw Men*. Ward Hopkins's father is a real-estate agent running his own firm, the appropriately named Unreality, and he has some very special, very wealthy, very private clients in the shape of a luxury-apartment complex, The Halls. But the social and cultural differences that are concretized this time around are not only socio-economic, they are also subcultural (as they were, to an extent, in the Neighbourhoods of *Only Forward*). And more than this, they concern criminality and pathology versus an imagined "norm" or mainstream. "Red" Neighbourhood came closest to fulfilling this function in MMS's first novel, but *The Straw Men*'s lines of moral division are far less playful. Where Red Neighbourhood was hard-boiled black comedy, *The Straw Men* errs on the even blacker side of bleak humour. Here, The Halls is a



truly exclusive set-up. People are dying to get in. Just not the people who actually take up residence there. This is Marshall's darkest use yet of architecture as narrative prop and premise. It is supported by an evident authorial interest in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, again reflected in the books that appear within *The Straw Men's* fictional world, linked to appropriate characters — on this occasion it is Ward's father who has a new biography of Frank Lloyd Wright on his coffee table (p27).

A third point of intersection between these two "first novels" is the issue of conspiracy. Although this theme is certainly also present in *Spare* and *One of Us*, it takes a particular shape in *Only Forward* and *The Straw Men*. In both cases, what appears to be the initial conspiratorial threat — the Dilligenz II plot, and the existence of the "Straw Men" — is eventually either discarded (*Only Forward*) and/or significantly reconfigured (*The Straw Men*) in favour of a focus on personal conflicts and the need for love, belonging and identity. Writing in *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction* (No. 80), I suggested that MMS's recurrent interest in conspiracy theories actually works to question blockbuster fiction's reliance

on conspiracy narrative:

"Rather than representing a 'degraded attempt' at mapping the social system, Smith's versions of conspiracy narrative... enact a second-order degradation... but within the involved realm of pop culture rather than from the detached vantage point of high theory... Smith suggests the inadequacy of the lure [of conspiracy theory]."

Where conspiracy theory goes astray and gets society wrong by suggesting, simplistically, that elite groups are in full control (hence its "degradation"), MMS's fiction suggests that conspiracy theory is attractive to its exponents because of its fatal flaws (hence his second-order "degradation," or critique). Conspiracies and conspiracy theories are both produced by people, people who desire more than anything to make sense of their lives. And it is this private, human desire for full meaning that is important, not the public face or façade of "the conspiracy." Smith's work — Marshall's work here — uses the lure of conspiracy theory. *The Straw Men* is nothing if not the tale of a conspiracy which begins, as if it could ever begin anywhere else, with a note hidden in a "paperback novel, a new-looking copy of a blockbuster thriller"

(p35). But MM(S)'s fiction challenges the neat resolutions and cognitive shortcuts (estrangements, even) of conspiratorial thoughts and actions. The creators of conspiracy are deranged, desperate for a life of meaning. So are the true believers of conspiracy theory. And blockbuster thrillers just feed this all back to us: instant drama, instant meaning.

A strong case can be made for *The Straw Men's* fuzzy science-fictionality, given its focus on characters whose identities are made strange to themselves, and its interest in extrapolating from serial-killer fact and fiction to produce a "fantastic" scenario of killer geography and social organization. I've argued here that the work of "Michael Marshall," however it is marketed and set apart from "Michael Marshall Smith" novels, shares so much with his previous books that it deserves full consideration in these pages. Smith's publishers appear far keener than either the author himself or his readers to build fences around generic neighbourhoods. With or without the "Smith," Michael Marshall Smith remains one of sf's great contemporary re-inventors, and *The Straw Men* gives us a new lease on the reality and realities of modern life.

Matt Hills

Neanderthals, those ancient hominid cousins of ours, first stuck in the public imagination as brutal, shambling cavemen; they're now redeemed as our larger-brained but less adaptive relatives. Claimed by sf for some time, they're handy metaphoric aliens — similar to us yet not quite human — from that stock sf world: the distant past. So it's not surprising that they emerge every now and then from the fossil record into print. Their latest appearance is in *Hominids* (Tor, \$25.95) by Canadian writer Robert J. Sawyer.

Sawyer presents us with the question: What if it was the Neanderthal, not *Homo sapiens sapiens* (us), who inherited the Earth? He then sets out to answer this question with gusto, presenting his view of Neanderthal society and their version of planet Earth. There's no doubt he's done his research — an extensive "Further Reading" section at the back of the novel emphasizes how he's spoken "directly with the experts," consulted hundreds of books, magazines, journal articles and websites. It even lists 32 books, for good measure, that he found "particularly stimulating." But has he written a good story? After all, *Hominids* is a novel, not a non-fictional synthesis of all this research.

The tale is set on our present-day Earth, and features the interaction of a group of scientists with a Neanderthal from a parallel world — an Earth side-

Brown Dwarfs and Genteel Giants

Nigel Brown

ways-in-time, not directly from our own "Neanderthal" prehistory. Thus we get to see how Neanderthals might have created a society in the 21st century, given their differences from *Homo sapiens*. Sawyer sets himself a difficult challenge here: not only must he create credible Neanderthals, but he has to run the clock forward and show us a believable modern Neanderthal civilization. And full marks to Sawyer for this: his 21st-century Neanderthals — although retaining their larger physical traits compared to us — are depicted as members of a rational society, quite at odds with their caveman image.

The story centres on a hapless Neanderthal scientist, Ponter Boddit, who

finds himself dumped inside the heavy-water container of a neutrino detector located several kilometres underground in a Canadian mine. It's a real sense-of-wonder start to a clearly written, well-paced tale. The pages fly by as Sawyer relates what happens to this visitor to our world, and then focuses on the reaction to him by a geneticist, Mary Vaughan. But if you're hoping for a literary metaphor which explores our civilization, comparing and contrasting *Homo sapiens* with what "might have been," you'll be disappointed. Sawyer veers away from too much satire — this is no *Planet of the Apes* — and chooses to concentrate on a story of civilized beings engaged in a discourse of differences. Perhaps aware that this hardly raises the pulse, he sets half the novel back in the Neanderthal world, where reactions to Ponter Boddit's sudden disappearance have greater dramatic consequences.

Yet I found unease creeping in halfway through this book. I began to have my doubts as Sawyer delved deeper into his Neanderthal world. The problem was with that second level of speculation, concerning the 21st-century Neanderthal technology. Sawyer has chosen to use what has become a standard sf trope — the cybernetic implant — to drive the plot. It turns out that all these modern Neanderthals have them. If this story was just a speculation about the device's impact on a society, then it would be fine. The problem is that the implant has such a large effect

on his Neanderthal world that it's difficult to disentangle it from how the Neanderthals truly are without it.

To compare and contrast these Neanderthals with us, you need a level playing field. But is this what Sawyer has set out to do, anyway? I'm not sure, because the story's not over yet. This novel is only the first of a trilogy, "The Neanderthal Parallax." And there's the rub – judgement must be withheld until at least February 2003, when the second book, *Humans*, is published. So far, the stage has been set, characters have been introduced, but be warned: after 431 pages there's little sense of closure. Yet I'm comfortable with that. *Hominids* is an honest book – it admits it's Volume One on the cover. I've had an enjoyable read, and now I've got another to look forward to.

Permanence (Tor, \$27.95) by another Canadian writer, Karl Schroeder, is altogether a different kind of work. A self-contained novel which ranges across star-systems, planets, ancient alien technologies... this is hard sf in the tradition of *Analog* magazine: it inherits the venerable icons of Campbellian sf and runs with them.

Set at an indeterminate time in the future, we discover that humans have colonized many star-systems, including those of brown dwarfs – stars which don't have sufficient mass to burn with nuclear fusion, but glow faint red from the heat of their slow gravitational contraction. There are many more of these scattered throughout the galaxy than the "lit" stars, so humanity has colonized them first. This demands a greater terraforming ingenuity, a better use of resources. So far, so good.

Here's the catch, here's the conflict: faster-than-light travel is discovered, but it only works for travel between the "lit" worlds, so we have a split between their colonies and the older settlements around the brown dwarfs (Schroeder calls them the *halo worlds*). This is a nifty way of having your cake and eating it. Schroeder is able to serve space-opera fare, but also to contrast such a world with that of a more "realistic" slower-than-light star-spanning civilization.

Yet Schroeder wisely sets up this complex scenario as a backdrop to the struggles of a girl from the bottom of the social order in the halo, Rue Casels. We follow her efforts to claw her way up from the bottom of the heap. Her journey – a tour through social strata as well as across interstellar space – allows her to encounter various characters along the way, eventually meeting exobiologist Michael Bequith. In many ways Bequith becomes the true protagonist of this novel. A "Neoshintoist," he has implants in his brain which allow him to capture the

kami, or transcendental experience, of the alien environments he's visited.

The aim of Neoshinto is to archive these experiences to allow humans to explore the limits of their neurological programming, in an attempt to aid their survival in deep interstellar colonies. Bequith's attempts to come to terms with these insights become an important subtext to the story, and Schroeder begins to switch to Bequith's particular viewpoint as the novel unfolds. Perhaps this is justified, as Bequith rapidly evolves into the most interesting character in the novel, but it does mean we lose our focus on the girl, and the strong identification with her which Schroeder worked so hard to create at the beginning of his novel.

In case you're wondering about the title, the theme of the book is that of stability in a changing world: a *Permanence*. Revelations abound throughout concerning this concept. Various defined, the simplest description I could find is the "creation and maintenance of a human civilization that could last a million years." There are echoes of an Asimovian agenda here, with Isaac Asimov's Foundation-like goal of preserving human civilization against the onset of 30,000 years of barbarism. But Schroeder paints on a larger canvas. He's concerned with the effect of our species changing over millions of years. If that seems irrelevant to the man on the street (and who but Woody Allen would lie awake at night sweating about it?), then Schroeder does manage to make the reader care.

Asimov gives a high moral motive to preserve civilization: the alleviation of suffering. Schroeder has found a more pragmatic reason for the ideal of *Permanence*. Machinery, in this case massive lasers to power light-sails, has to be kept working in perfect condition over centuries of intermittent use to allow

slower-than-light interstellar travel between the halo worlds. Unless civilization is preserved, contact will be lost between them. This is clever: a reason for preserving civilization based on technological, not moral, necessity. It lies closer to the heart of hard sf – where the reader takes pleasure in seeing the technological nuts and bolts that underpin a society. It also raises the important issue of how human societies may have to change to confront and overcome the demanding challenges posed by space exploration. The USA discovered this with their Apollo programme, having to build new technology to ever higher standards of excellence to successfully complete the Moon-landing missions. Only the ignorant quote "non-stick saucepans" when asked how we've all benefited from Apollo.

Schroeder goes beyond Asimov in another crucial way. He introduces aliens into his world, and does a skilful job of integrating them into the main plot without it seeming forced. Even better, though: the aliens have a refreshing quality of strangeness. John W. Campbell, the legendary editor of *Astounding* magazine – now known as *Analog* and the original home of hard sf – famously challenged his writers to come up with aliens who thought as well as humans, but not like humans. In other words, the complete opposite to the risible *Star Trek* aliens which are no more than actors with a bit of rubber stuck on their foreheads. If Schroeder hasn't quite achieved this goal, I can see that he's attempted it: none of the aliens have a similar biological viewpoint to humans. His effort is commendable. He shows a world where humans have this star-spanning empire, have faster-than-light travel and all the attendant expectations that we've got used to after decades of this fiction... yet he throws an *alienness* into the mix which adds spice to what otherwise might be, on the surface, standard space opera.

So much for the good points. As to the bad, there are a few – perhaps the reader spends too little time in each new environment to gather more than a taste before being whisked off to the next. That's a backhanded compliment, of course, but a number of the terraformed worlds our protagonist visits deserve more than a glimpse. My main gripe concerns the characters that populate this book. On the whole, they're not memorable in themselves and if Schroeder had done a fraction of the work on them that he's obviously done on their environments, the whole would have been a more enjoyable read. Despite this, there's no question that Schroeder proves that space opera can offer thoughtful insights into the reality of space colonization.

Great stuff.

Nigel Brown



BOOKS RECEIVED



JUNE/JULY 2002

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Abnett, Dan. **Hereticus: The Eisenhorn Trilogy, 3.** "Warhammer 40,000." Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84154-236-9, 315pp, A-format paperback, cover by Adrian Smith, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; Abnett has become a mainstay of GW's fiction factory.) 20th June 2002.

Anderson, Kevin J. **Hidden Empire: The Saga of Seven Suns.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-7342-2044-7, 679pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Sf novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition priced at £10.99 [not seen]; a big new space opera which the publishers promote as follows, covering all bases: "It is an epic in the truest sense of the word, combining the politics of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, the scope of Peter F. Hamilton's *Night's Dawn* trilogy, and the pageantry and romance of *Star Wars*.") 1st July 2002.

Barclay, James. **Nightchild: Chronicles of the Raven.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07300-4, 528pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; for some reason, it doesn't say "Book Three" anywhere on the packaging, but "Chronicles of the Raven: Book Three" it is, following *Dawnthief* [1999] and *Noonshade* [2000]; David Langford described the first in the trilogy as a "ripping yarn.") 11th July 2002.

Barnes, John. **The Sky So Big and Black.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30303-5, 315pp, hardcover, cover by Vince Natale, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; a new Mars-set story in the sequence begun with *Orbit Resonance* [1991] and *Candle* [2000]; with its first-person schoolgirl narrator having frequent conversations with her old Dad, it looks very much like yet another attempt at a "Heinlein juvenile.") 8th August 2002.

Barnett, Paul, ed. **The Fantasy Art Gallery: Conversations with 25 of the world's top fantasy/sf artists conducted for The Paper Snarl, the monthly e-zine associated with the publisher Paper Tiger.** Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-978-5, 128pp, very large-format paperback, £14.95. (Copiously illustrated collection of interviews with sf/fantasy artists, first edition; the cover gives the book's title as *Paper Tiger Fantasy Art Gallery*; among those interviewed are Brom, Jim Burns, Ciruelo Cabral, Judith Clute, Steve Crisp, Vincent Di Fate, Bob Eggleton, Fangorn, Frank Kelly Freas, Fred Gambino, David A. Hardy, John Harris, Ron Miller, Chris Moore, Nick Stathopoulos, Anne Sudworth and the late Ron Wlatsky [died since this book was published]; an attractive and useful volume; recommended.) 1st July 2002.

Baxter, Stephen. **Origin: Manifold 3.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-651184-8, 455pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2001; third in the author's "Manifold" hard-sf sequence.) 5th August 2002.

Baxter, Stephen. **Phase Space: Stories from the Manifold and Elsewhere.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-225769-6, 426pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Sf collection, first edition; it contains 25 stories, some of them linked to the "Manifold" sequence [see above], but most of them set against varied backgrounds; they are reprinted from a range of magazines and anthologies, and eight of them are from *Interzone* – "War Birds," "Sun God," "The Fubar Suit," "Lost Continent," "Tracks," "Barrier," "Marginalia" and "The Twelfth Album"; recommended.) 5th August 2002.

Blackwood, Algernon. **John Silence, Physician Extraordinary.** House of Stratus [Thirsk Industrial Park, York Rd., Thirsk, N. Yorks. YO7 3BX], ISBN 0-7551-0802-7, 324pp, trade paperback, £6.99. (Horror collection, first published in the UK, 1908 [not "1912" as it states in this volume]; Algernon Blackwood [1869-1951] was recently the subject of an interesting biography by Mike Ashley [*Starlight Man*, Constable, 2001]; one of Blackwood's early books, this is perhaps the work which did most to establish his reputation as a ghost-story writer; it consists of five long stories about the psychic investigations of that estimable Edwardian gentleman, Dr Silence – a sort of Sherlock Holmes of the supernatural; a welcome reprint of a fairly rare volume, it is one of a number of Blackwood titles recently reissued in paperback by print-on-demand publisher House of Stratus; for ordering information, see their website: www.houseofstratus.com; Stratus have kindly sent us another four of these books, all priced at £6.99; they are: *Ancient Sorceries and Other Stories* [1968], *Best Ghost Stories of Algernon Blackwood* [1973], *The Dance of Death and Other Stories* [1927] and the novel *The Human Chord* [1910; not "1928"]; all recommended.) July 2002.

Bloom, Clive. **Bestsellers: Popular Fiction Since 1900.** Palgrave Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-68743-4, xiii+292pp, C-format paperback, £14.99. (Critical study of popular fiction in Britain during the 20th century; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; Clive

Bloom, who teaches at Middlesex University, has written or edited a number of previous books on pop fic [e.g. *Cult Fiction: Popular Reading and Pulp Theory*, Macmillan Press, 1996]; this one consists of several general chapters – "How the British Read," "Genre: History and Form," etc – followed by an extensive section devoted to "Best-selling Authors Since 1900," containing entries on individual writers, and rounded off with more than a dozen appendices, giving statistics, lists, tables, etc; inevitably, many of the authors and works covered fall into the categories of sf, fantasy and horror; an interesting work to browse through, and a useful one to consult; recommended.) July 2002.

Cadigan, Pat. **Dervish is Digital.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87656-4, 230pp, trade paperback, cover by Bruce Jensen, \$12.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2000; a follow-up to *Tea from an Empty Cup* [1999], concerning the further adventures of policewoman Doré Konstantin in an artificial reality-dominated future; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 169.) 11th July 2002.

Chambers, Stephen. **Hope's War.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87350-6, 333pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; University of Chicago student Chambers's second novel – follow-up to *Hope's End* [2001].) 21st August 2002.

Clarke, Arthur C., and Stephen Baxter. **The Light of Other Days.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648374-7, 472pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; this is probably written mainly by Baxter – who may well be Clarke's ideal "collaborator" – and it's dedicated "To Bob Shaw," who wrote a famous short story of the same title in the 1960s; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 155.) 1st July 2002.

Clemens, James. **Wit'ch Fire: Book One of The Banned and the Banished.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-150-0, 496pp, A-format paperback, £6.99.



Clive Bloom





(Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; now making its first appearance in the UK, this was a debut novel by an American writer, and it's copyrighted in the name of Jim Czajkowski.) June 2002.

Cobley, Michael. **Shadowkings**. "Book One of the Shadowkings Trilogy." Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-1599-X, 436pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; a debut novel by a British writer who has been around for a while: his work has appeared in small-press magazines and anthologies for over a decade, and he contributed a story, "Corrosion," to *Interzone* 65, November 1992; reviewed by Tom Arden in *IZ* 173.) 1st July 2002.

Cornell, Paul. **British Summertime**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07368-3, 341pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition priced at £10.99 [not seen]; Cornell's second "serious" sf novel, following *Something More* [2001].) 27th June 2002.

Craig, Brian. **Plague Daemon: The Second Tale of Orfeo**. "A Warhammer Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library [Willow Rd., Lenton, Nottingham NG7 2WS], ISBN 1-85154-253-9, 242pp, A-format paperback, cover by Clint Langley, £5.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first published in the UK, 1990; "Brian Craig" is a pseudonym of Brian Stableford; as with earlier reprints of the older novels in this GW series, the text has been re-set in its entirety, so it may be that it has also been revised somewhat.) 24th June 2002.

Crowther, Peter, ed. **Mars Probes**. Introduction by Patrick Moore. DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0088-0, 315pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; a follow-up to the highly-praised anthology *Moon Shots* [1999], it contains mainly new Mars stories by a fine line-up of authors, many of them British: Brian Aldiss, Stephen Baxter, Eric Brown, Paul Di Filippo [his story is a sequel to Stanley G. Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey" (1934)], Scott Edelman, James Lovegrove, Paul McAuley, Ian McDonald, Michael Moorcock [his story, "Lost Sorceress of the Silent Citadel," is a homage to Leigh Brackett's Martian romances], James Morrow, Patrick O'Leary, Mike Resnick & M. Shayne Bell, Alastair Reynolds, Allen Steele and Gene Wolfe; the one reprint story is Ray Bradbury's "The Love Affair" [1982 – "never before published in the United States," claim the publishers here, which is quite untrue: it's had at least three prior US appearances, including in Bradbury's own collection, *The Toybee Convactor* (1988)]; veteran astronomy-popularizer Sir Patrick Moore provides a brief but engaging introduction in which he chats about Mars and reminisces about some of the famous men he has met in his lifetime, from Orville Wright to Neil Armstrong, from H. G. Wells to Arthur C. Clarke; although he's not named as co-editor, this book is clearly a Martin H. Greenberg production [copyright shared by Tekno Books, which is Greenberg's company].) June 2002.

Datlow, Ellen, and Terri Windling, eds. **The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror: Fifteenth Annual Collection**. St Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-29069-1, cxxviii+542pp, trade paperback, cover by Thomas Canty, \$19.95. (Horror/fantasy anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at \$35.95 [not seen]; as usual, the

prefatory material is massive in extent, with detailed year's summations by the two editors, a film-and-TV summation by Edward Bryant, a "Manga and Anime" round-up by Joan D. Vinge, a comics round-up, obituaries, etc; the body of the anthology contains reprint stories and poems, all first published in 2001, by James P. Blaylock, Michael Chabon, Susanna Clarke, Charles de Lint, Anthony Doerr, Jean-Claude Dunyach ["Wake Me When I Sleep," from *Interzone*], Carol Emshwiller, Jeffrey Ford, Christopher Fowler, Elizabeth Hand, Glen Hirshberg, Tanya Huff, Graham Joyce, Caitlin R. Kiernan, Kathe Koja & Barry N. Malzberg, Ursula K. Le Guin, Kelly Link, Liz Lochhead, Lawrence Miles, Susan Palwick, Norman Partridge, S. P. Somtow, Steve Rasnic Tem, Gene Wolfe, Jane Yolen and host of other, less-familiar names; recommended.) 21st August 2002.

De Larrabeiti, Michael. **The Horrible Trilogy**. Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-90861-9, 726pp, C-format paperback, cover by Liz Pyle, £12.99. (Juvenile fantasy omnibus, first edition; it contains the novels *The Horribles* [1976], *The Horribles Go for Broke* [1981] and *The Horribles: Across the Dark Metropolis* [1986] – which a *Times Educational Supplement* reviewer once described as "Battersea's answer to *Watership Down*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Guns of Navarone*"; fellow London boy and Macmillan author China Miéville commends this long-overdue repackaging for adults of a classic trilogy – originally published, as the publishers admit, "25 years before its time"; we are told that Michael de Larrabeiti was brought up in Battersea [born circa 1937], his mother a Londoner and his father "a disappearing Basque from Bilbao"; he was educated at Clapham Central Secondary School, and later at more distinguished institutions in Dublin, Paris and Oxford, and "has written ten books as well as a great deal of travel journalism.") 28th June 2002.

Dick, Philip K. **Minority Report**. Introduction by Malcolm Edwards. Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-738-1, xi+290pp, hardcover, £6.99. (Sf collection, first edition; an attractive small hardcover at a paperback price, this is obviously intended both to tie in with the recent Steven Spielberg movie, *Minority Report*, and to serve as a "beginners" introduction to Dick's short stories; it contains nine tales from the 1950s and '60s, all much collected before, and the unnamed editor [presumably Malcolm Edwards] has been careful to include all those that have been made into films, or for which films are thought to be planned.) July 2002.

Dozois, Gardner, ed. **The Year's Best Science Fiction: Nineteenth Annual Collection**. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-28878-6, xlv+637pp, hardcover, cover by Donato Giancola, \$35. (Sf anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at \$19.95 [not seen]; as well as the usual lengthy introduction and year's summation, it contains stories, all reprinted from 2001, by Eleanor Arnason, Michael Blumlein, Michael Cassutt, Brenda W. Clough, Paul Di Filippo, Andy Duncan, Carolyn Ives Gilman, Simon Ings, James Patrick Kelly, Nancy Kress, Paul McAuley, Maureen F. McHugh, Ian R. MacLeod [twice], Ken MacLeod, Robert Reed, Alastair Reynolds, Geoff Ryman, Dan Simmons, Allen M. Steele, Charles Stross, Michael Swanwick and others; two of the selections are from

Interzone – Ian R. MacLeod's "Isabel of the Fall" and Chris Beckett's "Marcher"; recommended.) 23rd July 2001.

Drake, Emily. **The Curse of Arkady: The Magickers #2**. DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0074-0, viii+305pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Youll, \$19.95. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; second in a series attempting to cash in on the Harry Potter boom; "Emily Drake" is a pseudonym of Rhondi Vilott Salsitz, who has written copiously under various names [including sf novels as "Charles Ingrid"], mainly for DAW Books.) June 2002.

Eddings, David and Leigh. **Regina's Song**. "A tense, chilling story of a nightmare come true." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-713033-3, 424pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition [?]; a change of pace from this husband-and-wife team's usual Big Commercial Fantasies – but doesn't the world already have enough "brutal serial killer" novels?) 5th August 2002.

Faraday, W. Barnard. **Pendragon**. Introduction by Raymond H. Thompson. "Pendragon Fiction." Green Knight Publishing [900 Murmansk St., Suite 5, Oakland, CA 94607, USA], ISBN 1-928999-29-8, 285pp, trade paperback, cover by Marc Fishman, \$19.95 [£13.99 in the UK]. (Arthurian historical novel, first published in the UK, 1930; the little-known British author, Wilfred Barnard Faraday [1874-1953], served in World War I and subsequently wrote a number of books, both fiction and non-fiction; this long-unavailable novel seems to have been one of the first "serious" examples of the use of Arthuriana in 20th-century historical fiction; recommended to those with an interest in 5th- and 6th-century Dark Age settings.) Late entry: April publication, received in June 2002.

Fforde, Jasper. **Lost in a Good Book**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-73357-8, 372pp, B-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £6.99. (Humorous fantasy/mystery novel, first edition; this is a follow-up to the author's debut novel, *The Eyre Affair* [2001], which we didn't see; it concerns the further adventures of Thursday Next, "literary detective and registered dodo owner," as she delves into a case in which "paper politicians, lost Shakespearean manuscripts, woolly mammoth migrations, a flurry of near-fatal coincidences and impending Armageddon are all part of a greater plan"; admirers of Douglas Adams and Robert Rankin may find this series congenial.) 18th July 2002.

Fisher, Jude. **Sorcery Rising: Book One of Fool's Gold**. DAW, 0-7564-0083-X, 469pp, hardcover, cover by Michael Whelan, \$23.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; opening volume of an Icelandic-flavoured high fantasy trilogy; "Jude Fisher" is a pseudonym of HarperCollins/Voyager editor Jane Johnson, who has previously written several cat fantasies in collaboration with M. John Harrison under the joint pseudonym "Gabriel King" [see below]; this is her first solo novel.) July 2002.

Goldstein, Lisa. **The Alchemist's Door**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30150-4, 286pp, hardcover, cover by Gregory Manchess, \$23.95. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; it concerns the English magician, Dr John Dee, in exile in Prague... where he meets the famous Rabbi Judah Loew.) 7th August 2002.

Gray, Julia. **The Red Glacier: Book Four of The Guardian Cycle.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-123-3, 535pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "Julia Gray" is believed to be a pseudonym of Mark and Julia Smith, who previously wrote as "Jonathan Wylie.") June 2002.

Green, Simon R. **Down Among the Dead Men.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05620-7, 221pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Farren, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1993.) 11th July 2002.

Halliday, Mags L. **History 101.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53854-6, 275pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor.) 1st July 2002.

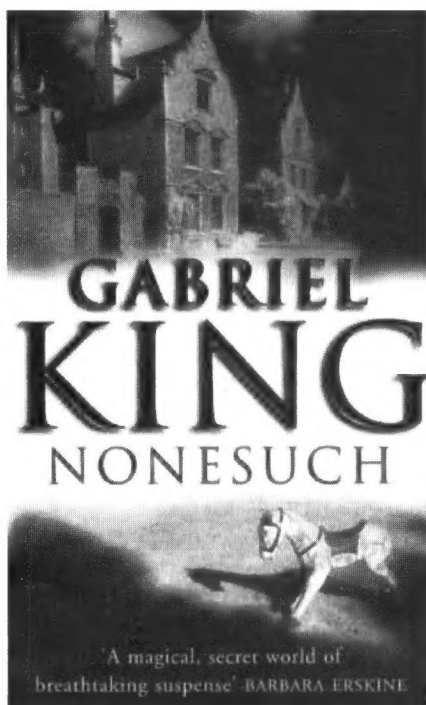
Hamilton, Peter F. **Fallen Dragon.** Pan, ISBN 0-333-48006-5, 808pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2001; an interplanetary adventure, it's described as "a stand-alone, action-packed novel of quite staggering imagination from the best-selling British author"; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 179.) 5th July 2002.

Harlan, Thomas. **The Dark Lord: Book Four of The Oath of Empire.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86560-0, 538pp, hardcover, cover by Stephen Hickman, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; conclusion of the tetralogy which began with *The Shadow of Ararat* [1999], *The Gate of Fire* [2000] and *The Storm of Heaven* [2001]; although Big Commercial Fantasy, with magic, it's set in a quasi-science-fictional alternative timeline where Rome did not fall; the author is a former games-designer.) 25th July 2002.

Harris, Christopher. **Memoirs of a Byzantine Eunuch.** Dedalus, ISBN 1-903517-03-6, 358pp, B-format paperback, cover by Willi Gray, £9.99. (Historical novel, first edition; the author is British [born 1951] and has written two previous historical novels, *Theodore* [2000; based on the life of Theodore of Tarsus, who became an early and influential Archbishop of Canterbury] and *False Ambassador* [2001; a 15th-century swashbuckler]; his new one is set in 9th-century Constantinople; although it doesn't appear to have any overt fantasy content, the publishers describe it as "an archetypal Dedalus novel... [which] bears comparison with David Madsen's masterpiece *Memoirs of a Gnostic Dwarf*" [1995].) 4th July 2002.

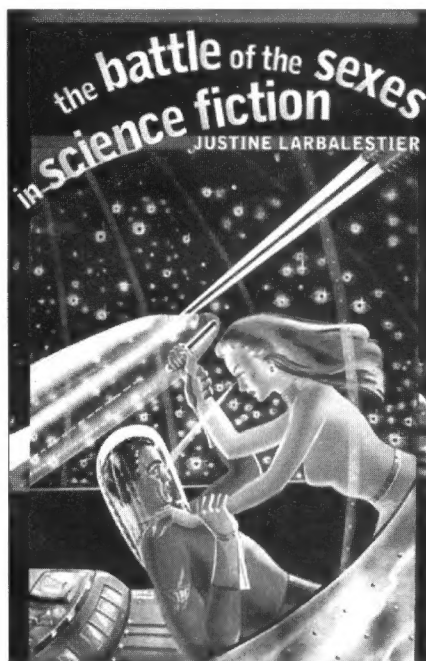
Holdstock, Robert. **The Iron Grail: Book Two of the Merlin Codex.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-7432-2077-3, 301pp, hardcover, cover by Larry Rostant, £17.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *Celtika* [2001].) 5th August 2002.

Hollinger, Veronica, and Joan Gordon, eds. **Edging into the Future: Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation.** University of Pennsylvania Press, ISBN 0-8122-1804-3, viii+278pp, trade paperback, \$22.50 [£16 in UK]. (Collection of academic essays about the "cutting edge" of modern sf; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at \$59.50 or £42 [not seen]; this is a more solid and distinguished-seeming volume of academic papers on sf than the last couple we have seen – *Digging Holes in Popular Culture* [see *IZ* 180, p65] and *Lost in Space: Geographies of Science Fiction* [see *IZ* 181, September 2002]



p65-66]; in this case the contributors' names are familiar to us because of their work in *SF Studies* and elsewhere; they include Brian Attebery, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Gwyneth Jones, Brooks Landon, Rob Latham, Roger Luckhurst, Lance Olsen, Brian Stableford, Gary K. Wolfe, Jenny Wolmark and others – an all-star cast as far as this kind of volume is concerned.) Late entry: 10th May publication, received in June 2002.

Holt, Tom. **Falling Sideways.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-110-1, 406pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Cemmick, £6.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; it concerns "the hideous truth: that humanity's ascent has been ruthlessly guided by a small gang of devious frogs.") June 2002.



Holt, Tom. **Little People.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-116-0, 374pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Cemmick, £16.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; it concerns elves.) June 2002.

Jones, Gwyneth. **Castles Made of Sand.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07032-3, xii+356pp, hardcover, cover by Anne Sudworth, £17.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition priced at £10.99 [not seen]; sequel to the Arthur C. Clarke Award-winning *Bold as Love* [2001].) 4th July 2002.

Kenyon, Tim. **Ersatz Nation.** Big Engine [PO Box 185, Abingdon, Oxon. OX14 1GR], ISBN 1-903468-07-8, 233pp, trade paperback, cover by Deirdre Counihan, £9.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a debut by a new American writer; this is the seventh book from the print-on-demand publishing house run by Ben Jeapes; for ordering information, see the website: www.bigengine.co.uk.) Late entry: June publication, received in July 2002.

King, Gabriel. **Nonesuch.** Arrow, ISBN 0-09-929710-8, 435pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Gothic-flavoured animal fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; the author's fourth book, following *The Wild Road* [1997], *The Golden Cat* [1998] and *The Knot Garden* [2001]; "Gabriel King" is a joint pseudonym for Jane Johnson [sf and fantasy editor at HarperCollins UK] and M. John Harrison [eminent novelist]; until we received the paperback we didn't even know this book existed – it seems a hardcover slipped out quietly last year.) 20th June 2002.

Larbalestier, Justine. **The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction.** Wesleyan University Press [110 Mt Vernon St., Middletown, CT 06459, USA], ISBN 0-8195-6527-X, xv+295pp, trade paperback, cover from *Astonishing Stories* [June 1940], \$19.95. (Critical history of the "sex wars" theme in sf, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at \$50 [not seen]; this illustrated study of an old subject – seen here from an academic, feminist perspective, natch – looks to be lively and well-informed; it delves deep into the history of American sf fandom, as well as the genre's magazines and books; the author works in the Department of English at the University of Sydney, Australia; recommended.) 20th June 2002.

Lethem, Jonathan. **Amnesia Moon.** Faber & Faber, ISBN 0-571-20964-5, 247pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 100; the publishers try to give the impression that it hasn't appeared in the UK before, but yes, it has: New English Library published it as *Amnesia Moon: A Road Movie* in October 1995.) 8th July 2002.

Lewis, Mick. **Combat Rock.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53855-4, 284pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Second Doctor, Jamie and Victoria.) 1st July 2002.

Lindholm, Megan. **Luck of the Wheels.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-711255-6, 408pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Gregory, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1989; follow-up to *Harpy's Flight*, *The Windsingers* and *The Limbreth Gate* in "The Ki and Vandien Quartet"; the cover describes the author as "Megan Lindholm... WHO ALSO WRITES AS ROBIN HOBB.") 1st July 2002.

Little, Denise, ed. **Familiars**. DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0081-3, 319pp, A-format paperback, cover by Judy York, \$6.99. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains 15 all-original stories on magical-animal themes, by P. N. Elrod, Bill McCay, Andre Norton, Jody Lynn Nye, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Josepha Sherman, Michelle West and others; although he's not named as co-editor, it's clearly another Martin H. Greenberg production [copyright shared by Tekno Books, which is Greenberg's company].) July 2002.

Lovegrove, James. **The Hope**. Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-802-7, 220pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf/horror novel, first published in the UK, 1990; a reissue of Lovegrove's debut book, with a one-page "Afterword" in which he states that the text has been lightly revised.) 20th June 2002.

Lovegrove, James. **Imagined Sights**. Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-801-9, 276pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf/horror collection, first edition; the author's first gathering of shorter work, it includes 13 stories, three of which – "Britworld," "The Drifting" and "The Gift" [formerly "Giving and Taking"] – first appeared in *Interzone*, and two of which – "Nana" and "The Unmentionable" – are original to the book; the remainder first appeared variously in small-press magazines or Peter Crowther's anthologies [the book is dedicated: "For P.C.":]; recommended.) 20th June 2002.

McAuley, Paul. **Whole Wide World**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-651331-X, 388pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2001; it's set a decade or so from now, "two years after the InfoWar"; the hardcover blurb described it as "an outstanding near-future police thriller in the vein of Greg Bear and Michael Marshall Smith"; reviewed by Tom Arden in *IZ* 173.) 15th July 2002.

McDevitt, Jack. **Chindi**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00938-7, 403pp, hardcover, cover by Edwin Herder, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; another hard-sf, outer-space-set novel of scientific mystery and adventure from the solidly old-fashioned but popular Mr McDevitt – "the logical heir of Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke," according to his admirer Stephen King.) 2nd July 2002.

McMahon, Donna. **Dance of Knives**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87536-3, 416pp, trade paperback, cover by Robert Alexander, \$15.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2001; the debut of a new Canadian writer, it's a thriller set in 22nd-century Vancouver.) 18th June 2002.

Marshall, Michael. **The Straw Men**. "Friends. Neighbours. Serial killers." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-225601-0, 373pp, hardcover, £10. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; this is a new byline for Michael Marshall Smith, who has been rebranded – probably, in the main, for the American market, to avoid confusion with Martin Cruz Smith and other like-named people; it's his fourth novel, but the first under this form of his name; reviewed by Matt Hills in this issue of *Interzone*.) 5th August 2002.

Moore, C. L. **Black Gods and Scarlet Dreams**. "Fantasy Masterworks, 31." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07417-5, 438pp, B-format paperback, cover by Caravaggio, £6.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition in this form; it contains 15 stories by Catherine Lucille Moore [1911-1987], most of them from

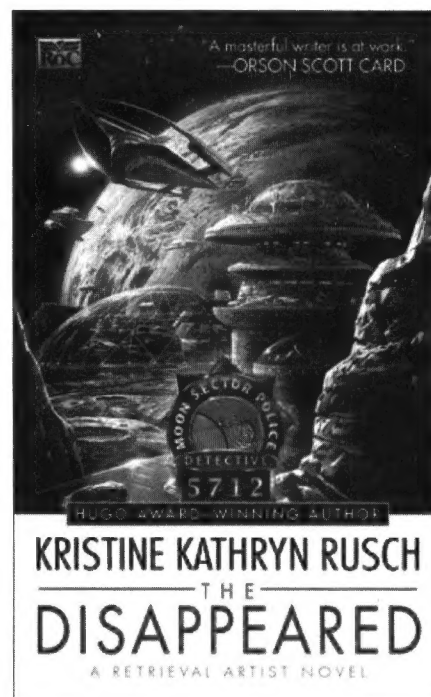
1930s issues of *Weird Tales*, and all of them featuring either her sword-and-sorcery heroine Jirel of Joiry or her planetary-romance hero Northwest Smith; all have been collected previously in such American-published books as *Northwest of Earth* [1954], *Jirel of Joiry* [1969] and *Scarlet Dream* [1981], but it's good to have them available in a British-published volume for the first time.) 11th July 2002.

Reynolds, Alastair. **Redemption Ark**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06879-5, 567pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £17.99. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at £10.99 [not seen]; Reynolds's third novel, and another blockbuster; follow-up to his well-received *Revelation Space* [2000] and *Chasm City* [2001].) 4th July 2002.

Robb, Brian J. **The Pocket Essential James Cameron**. "Pocket Essentials Film." Pocket Essentials [18 Coleswood Rd., Harpenden, Herts. AL5 1EQ], ISBN 1-903047-95-1, 96pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Unillustrated guide to the movies, mainly science-fictional, of Canadian-born US director James Cameron [born 1954]; first edition; it's another useful little volume in this ever-expanding series on the popular arts – they're still good value for money.) July 2002.

Roberts, Adam. **Stone**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07064-1, viii+261pp, C-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £9.99. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £16.99 [not seen]; this is the third novel by Roberts, following *Salt* [2000] and *On* [2002].) 18th July 2002.

Rose, Lloyd. **Camera Obscura**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53857-0, 280pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor; "Lloyd Rose" is evidently a pseudonym, though we don't really believe [as cunningly misinformed by the publishers] that it's for a writer called Sarah Tonyn.) 5th August 2002.



Rusch, Kristine Kathryn. **The Disappeared: A Retrieval Artist Novel**. Roc, ISBN 0-451-45888-5, 374pp, A-format paperback, cover by Greg Bridges, \$6.50. (Sf/crime novel, first edition; this appears to be the first of a series based on the author's novella "The Retrieval Artist," published in *Analog*.) July 2002.

Russell, Gary. **The Art of The Fellowship of the Ring**. "The Lord of the Rings." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-713563-7, 192pp, large-format hardcover, £25. (Fantasy movie art portfolio, first edition; it contains "500 exclusive paintings and drawings from the spectacular film" – i.e., from Peter Jackson's movie based on J. R. R. Tolkien's novel.) 1st July 2002.

Saberhagen, Fred. **Gods of Fire and Thunder: Book V of Book of the Gods**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30201-2, 319pp, hardcover, cover by Julie Bell, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; unlike its predecessors, *The Face of Apollo*, *Ariadne's Web*, *The Arms of Hercules* and *God of the Golden Fleece*, which were all set in ancient Greek times, this one deals with the Norse gods.) 6th August 2002.

Saint, Paul. **The Suns of Caresh**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53858-9, 283pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Third Doctor and Jo; a debut novel; "Paul Saint" is believed to be a pseudonym for someone who reviews regularly for this magazine.) 5th August 2002.

Siegel, Jan. **Witch's Honour**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-225839-0, 312pp, hardcover, cover by the John Howe, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; conclusion to the trilogy begun with *Prospero's Children* [1999] and *The Dragon-Charmer* [2000]; "Jan Siegel" is a pseudonym of Amanda Hemingway, who wrote the sf novel *Pzyche* [1982] plus a number of other works.) 15th July 2002.

Silverberg, Robert, and Karen Haber, eds. **Fantasy: The Best of 2001**. ibooks, ISBN 0-7434-5247-X, viii+424pp, A-format paperback, cover by Scott Grimando, £5.99. (Fantasy anthology, first published in the USA, 2002; this is the US first edition with a UK price and publication date; a new, much cheaper, competitor to Datlow & Windling's *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror* [see above], it has a revealing acknowledgment – "Special thanks to Martin Greenberg and Larry Segriff" – which suggests that this is probably yet another Greenberg-packaged anthology; it contains a brief introduction and 11 stories, all reprinted from 2001, by Poul Anderson, Catherine Asaro, Ted Chiang, Rosemary Edghill, Brian A. Hopkins, Ursula K. Le Guin ["The Bones of the Earth," also in Datlow & Windling's anthology], Lawrence Miles ["Grass," also in Datlow & Windling], Jack O'Connell, Lucius Shepard, Robert Thurston and Greg van Eekhout; there are just two overlaps with Datlow & Windling's book, by our count.) July 2002.

Silverberg, Robert, and Karen Haber, eds. **Science Fiction: The Best of 2001**. ibooks, ISBN 0-7434-3498-6, ix+496pp, A-format paperback, cover by Scott Grimando, £5.99. (Sf anthology, first published in the USA, 2002; this is the US first edition with a UK price and publication date; a new, much cheaper, competitor to Dozois's *Year's Best SF* [see above], it has an acknowledgment –

"Special thanks to Martin Greenberg and Larry Segriff" – which hints that this is probably yet another Greenberg-packaged anthology; it contains a brief introduction and 11 stories, all reprinted from 2001, by Robin Wayne Bailey, Stephen Baxter, Gregory Benford, Michael Blumlein ["Know How, Can Do," also in Dozois's anthology], Jim Grimsley ["Into Greenwood," also in Dozois], James Patrick Kelly ["Undone," also in Dozois], Nancy Kress, Dan Simmons ["On K2 with Kanakeredes," also in Dozois], Michael Swanwick ["The Dog Said Bow-Wow," also in Dozois], Richard Wadholm and Ian Watson; there are five overlaps with Dozois's book, by our count.) *Late entry: March publication, received in July 2002.*

Smith, Fred. **Once There Was a Magazine.... A Personal View of Unknown & Unknown Worlds.** Becon Publications [75 Rosslyn Ave., Harold Wood, Essex RM3 0RG], ISBN 1-870824-45-8, 107pp, small-press paperback, cover by Sue Mason, £7. (Narrative history of, and indices to, the US pulp fantasy magazine *Unknown/Unknown Worlds* [1939-1943]; first edition; this seems to be a thorough job, and includes full details of the separate British edition of the magazine in question; although not a great commercial success in its day, *Unknown*, edited by John W. Campbell as a sister magazine to his *Astounding SF*, has long been honoured by fantasy fans as one of the best publications of its kind ever to appear in America.) 20th July 2002.

Stephenson-Payne, Phil. **Michael G. Coney: Troubadour of Earth—A Working Bibliography.** "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader, Volume 56." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-61-0, ix+30pp, small-press paperback, £2. (Sf author bibliography, first edition; Michael Coney [born 1932] came to prominence in the British sf of the 1970s, although latterly he has been living in Canada; this modestly-priced but detailed booklet may well be the first published bibliography of his work.) July 2002.

Stirling, S. M. **T2: Infiltrator.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07371-3, 499pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf-movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2001; according to the title page, it's "based on the world created in the motion picture written by James Cameron and William Wisher"; they don't bother to actually name the film on the title page, but evidently it's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* [directed by James Cameron, 1991]; the author, Stephen Michael Stirling – not published in Britain before, to the best of our knowledge – is a Canadian, born 1953, who achieved some American fame over a decade ago with his "Draka" series of militaristic sf novels.) 11th July 2002.

Stirling, S. M. **T2: Rising Storm.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07156-7, 378pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf-movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2002; second of a series which, according to the reverse title page, is "based on the world created in the motion picture written by James Cameron and William Wisher"; as with the first book, they don't name the film in question, but obviously it's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*.) 18th July 2002.

Tepper, Sheri S. **The Visitor.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07416-7, 407pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Rawlings, £10.99. (Sf novel, first published September 2002

in the USA, 2002; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £17.99 [not seen]; it's set on an Earth, many centuries hence, devastated by an asteroid impact.) 18th July 2002.

Turtledove, Harry, S. M. Stirling, Mary Gentle and Walter Jon Williams. **Worlds That Weren't.** "All-New Novellas of Alternate History." Roc, ISBN 0-451-45886-9, 295pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Alternate-history sf anthology, first edition; no editor is named [is this Martin H. Greenberg's latest tactic – complete withdrawal, to pare his fingernails somewhere in heaven, leaving not even the wrack of a copyright acknowledgment behind?], but this book attractively presents four solid new novellas by well-known writers: Turtledove's "The Daimon," Stirling's "Shikari in Galveston," Gentle's "The Logistics of Carthage" and Williams's "The Last Ride of German Freddie"; British readers may value it particularly for the new Mary Gentle story, which is 80 pages long.) July 2002.

Utter, Virgil. **George Allan England: Scientific Romancer—A Working Bibliography.** "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader, Volume 54." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-59-9, ix+68pp, small-press paperback, £4. (Sf author bibliography, first edition; England [1877-1936], author of *Darkness and Dawn* [1914] and many other works, was once a rival to Edgar Rice Burroughs and almost as popular; forgotten by the world at large, he remains well known to collectors of American pulp magazines and historians of sf; this modestly-priced but detailed bibliography should be welcomed by scholars of the field.) August 2002.

Utter, Virgil. **Perley Poore Sheehan: Shadow Master—A Working Bibliography.** "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader, Volume 55." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-60-2, ix+30pp, small-press paperback, £2. (Fantasy author bibliography, first edition; Sheehan [1875-1943] will be mighty obscure to most people; however, collectors of American pulp magazines and aficionados of lost-race fiction will recognize the name; this modestly-priced but detailed booklet is recommended to them.) July 2002.

Vallejo, Boris, and Julie Bell. **Twin Visions: The Magical Art of Boris Vallejo and Julie Bell.** Text by Nigel Suckling. Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-978-5, 128pp, large-format hardcover, cover by Vallejo, £20. (Fantasy art portfolio; first edition; a new volume by the husband-and-wife American artists who must be Paper Tiger's best-sellers [judging from the number of books by them that this publishing imprint has produced], containing "over 120 fantastical paintings gathered together for the first time"; there's some variety here, particularly among Julie's offerings [which include a couple of "straight" wildlife paintings, and a portrait of her two teenage sons – fully clothed!], but for the most part it's the usual highly-coloured, all-action, impossibly curvaceous and musclebound stuff.) 31st July 2002.

Vance, Jack. **Alastor.** Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-312-86952-5, 479pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Sf omnibus,

first published in the USA, 1995; it contains the novels *Trullion: Alastor* 2262 [1973], *Marune: Alastor* 933 [1975], and *Wyst: Alastor* 1716 [1978] – a loose trilogy set in the eponymous "sprawling system of 30,000 live stars and 3,000 inhabited planets.") 12th July 2002.

Warren, Dean. **Growing Young.** Xlibris, ISBN 1-4010-5163-4, 369pp, hardcover, cover by Peggy Warren, \$19.50. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; the plot is synopsized in one sentence on cover and title page: "An old man who suddenly becomes young must help the world accept an age cure"; this is a small-press item by a not-so-young author whose two earlier novels, described as "thinking men's science fiction," were *Man Over Mind* and *The Last Underclass*; see website – www.Xlibris.com – for ordering details.) No date shown: received in June 2002.

Watson, Ian. **Draco: Book 1 of the Inquisition War.** "Warhammer 40,000." Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84154-254-7, 238pp, A-format paperback, cover by Clint Langley, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first published in the UK as *Inquisitor*, 1990; a Gothic space opera of considerable inventiveness and atmosphere; in addition to the title change [which is not acknowledged] there may have been some textual revisions.) 12th July 2002.

Weis, Margaret, and Tracy Hickman. **Guardians of the Lost: The Sovereign Stone Trilogy, Book 2.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648615-0, 676pp, A-format paperback, cover by Martin McKenna, £7.99. (Fantasy game spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2001; according to a note, this trilogy is based on a world created by the artist Larry Elmore which has also inspired a role-playing game devised by Lester Smith and Don Perrin.) 15th July 2002.

Wells, H. G. **The Autocracy of Mr Parham.** House of Stratus [Thirsk Industrial Park, York Rd., Thirsk, N. Yorks. YO7 3BX], ISBN 0-7551-0391-2, 335pp, hardcover, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1930; one of Wells's lesser-known books, this is a near-future political novel which takes readers of 1930 up to and through a predicted Second World War; a rarely-available item for completists, it's one of many Wells titles recently reissued in handy small-hardcover format by House of Stratus; for ordering information, see their website: www.houseofstratus.com; Stratus have kindly sent us a further seven of the other books, including *The Brothers* and *The Croquet Player* [two novellas in one volume; £7.99], *The Conquest of Time* and *The Happy Turning* [two short non-fiction works in one volume; £7.99], *The Dream* [£9.99], *The Sea Lady* [£7.99], *The Time Machine* [£7.99], *The War of the Worlds* [£7.99] and *The Wonderful Visit* [£7.99] – all recommended.) June 2002.

Wells, H. G. **The Holy Terror.** House of Stratus [Thirsk Industrial Park, York Rd., Thirsk, N. Yorks. YO7 3BX], ISBN 0-7551-0405-6, 504pp, hardcover, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1939; Wells's last sf book, and quite a lengthy one, this is the life story of a superman who becomes a future dictator; another rarely-available item, recommended for completists; for ordering information, see website: www.houseofstratus.com.) July 2002.



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